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WILLIAM F. TEMPLE



JOHN ASHCROFT



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# SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 4 No. 21

1961

## Outstanding Science Fiction Stories

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Amara was a strange planet. Nothing conformed to known laws or logic. Physically it was a mad world.

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#### **NO LONGER ALONE John Ashcroft 62**

Given two cultures with opposing interests living on the same planet, how integrate them for their common good ?

Edited by JOHN CARNELL

Cover by LEWIS illustrating "No Longer Alone"

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*Author Temple has been writing science fiction for nearly 25 years, surpassed in time only by John Wyndham amongst British authors. Part of his writing charm has always been the unexpected approach to a plot, as you will see in this unusual journey on an unusual planet.*

# A TREK TO NA-ABIZA

by WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

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## Chapter One

On the astronomers' charts the Three Suns bore dull number-plates : CXY 927340, CXY 927341, CXY 927342. The men from Earth called them simply by their colours : Blue, Yellow, Red. It seemed more than coincidence that they were the primary colours. But if it were more, who could explain it ?

Who could explain anything that happened under the light of the Three Suns ?

For instance, the orbit between them of CXY 927340 /1 /2-A. (Men again ignored the number-plate. To them it was Amara.) Amara was a coveted only child, a living planet, and the Three Suns shared it among them with scrupulous justice.

Ethically, that made sense. Physically, it was mad. Mathematicians, who had for centuries torn their hair over the Problem of the Three Bodies, would sink into melancholy after trying to produce on paper proof of what they indisputably saw. This despite the mountain of data concerning the vagaries of gravitational fields which had grown since interstellar travel became commonplace.

Blue, Yellow, and Red were spaced like the balls of the ancient sign denoting pawnbroking, forming an equilateral triangle. Amara circled each sun in turn, rotating on its own axis as it went, providing rainbow-coloured days for the Amarans but never black night. The nearest to night, probably was when Amara entered upon the passage between Blue and Red, and the clouds were empurpled and people's faces seemed dark and strange. But soon Yellow's contribution dispelled the shadows, and when Amara had swung around to the far side of Yellow the sky was bright indeed.

Between Yellow and Blue, grass-green was the light. Between Red and Yellow, a warm orange.

The juxtapositions of suns and planet, vaporous clouds and dust-clouds, were of course infinite, and the skies of Earth seemed in retrospect like faded curtains to one who'd seen the glowing, kaleidoscopic heavens of Amara.

Sherret remembered Earth, with no particular regret. Amara confirmed his view of the universe at large. It was the Grand Doodle. The Grand Doodler's conscious attention had been on something else while his subconscious idly sketched out the pointless pattern of the universe. An enormously intricate pattern, naturally, from the depths of an enormously intricate mind. But conscious intention it had not. And man was never so comical, futile, or boring as when he assumed he knew, and dilated upon, the meaning of it all.

All men are Doodles. Why argue ?

But argue you must when Hobson's Choice is thrust upon you.

Captain Maxton said : " Make up your mind, Sherret. Are you a Goffist or a Repairist ? "

" I'm a Sherretist, sir. "

" Don't be funny. I've got to know where I stand. "

" You should stand on your own feet, sir. "

The Captain flushed. " I take it, then, you're still a Repairist ? "

" Oh, damn all 'isms, " said Sherret, impatiently. " Men are men, no Goffists, Repairists, Papists, Royalists, Chartists, Communists, Fascists, Buddhists, Methodists, Existentialists, or what have you. "

The Captain almost looked him in the eye. Not quite. He said : " In any society, everyone has to accept the rules, else the society collapses into anarchism. "

" I agree with you, sir. "

"But under Reparism the rules are too rigid. If you don't like 'em, you can't do much to change 'em. But a Goffist always gets his chance to change things, as much as he likes—for a time, anyhow. Your turn to be Captain will come."

"And go, sir."

"Naturally. It's a law of life. Things come, things go. Stasis means stagnation. Now look, Sherret, I'm going to leave you alone for thirty minutes. Think it over and decide finally whether you're with us or against us. If you're against us, you don't belong here. You can get to hell out of it. Go over to Bagshaw and his crew, if they'll have you. That's if you get there. For you'll have to walk on your own flat feet. I'm not risking what little transport we have on a dissenter. That's it. I'll be back in half an hour."

Captain Maxton went out bad-temperedly. He would have liked to have slammed the door to show Sherret just how bad his temper was. Spaceship doors weren't free-swinging, however. This one sighed benignly shut behind him.

Sherret relaxed on the bunk by the port-hole. He echoed the door's sigh and began chewing on a B-stick to relieve his tension. Like all spacemen, he'd had to put smoking behind him when he left Earth. If pipes and cigarettes were substitutes for feeding-bottles at moments of regression into infancy, then B-sticks were probably teething rings. They helped when you felt like biting somebody.

Of course, the decision was already made. No Goffism for him. Goff was an idiot psychosociologist who advocated absolute rule by each qualified worker in a local community for a month, and absolute obedience by the rest—until their turn came.

The plan was to have as many ideas put into practice as possible, instead of their languishing and dying untried. Pragmatism plus. If it worked, it was true and good. Goff trusted that general commonsense would ensure the survival of the fittest ideas.

Sherret reflected that Goff, like most psychosociologists, was inflated with theory and devoid of any real knowledge concerning human nature, its perversions and manias. It was the scheme of an unbalanced man to breed unbalanced men. All power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely, as Acton had it.

It was a pity that the ship had at last re-established contact with Earth and learned that Goffism was being widely adopted there. Trust Maxton to welcome it. He should never have become Captain. Just about everybody else had had to make his decisions for him.

Bagshaw was a different kind of man. He had become Captain by long application, experience, and merit. Sherret couldn't imagine him handing over his ship to the assistant cook and remaining in bed till noon because the assistant cook didn't believe in early rising.

So Sherret would go and serve under Bagshaw. There was an initial difficulty, however. Bagshaw's ship, the *Pegasus*, had landed some three hundred miles away, at a place called by the natives Na-Abiza.

There was a lot of rough country in between. Largely unknown country, inhabited by unknown creatures. Maybe many, maybe few. Maybe hostile, maybe not. Judging from samples of life hitherto encountered within a radius of some twenty miles from the ship, there was the promise of novelty. The road to Na-Abiza should be interesting—so long as one remained alive and capable of interest.

Sherret chewed his B-stick and through the port-hole watched the cyclorama of the sky as Amara cruised between her parent suns.

Captain Maxton returned as the chronometer ticked the last seconds of the half-hour.

"Well, Sherret?"

"I presume you'll pack me some sandwiches for the trek, sir?"

Red and Yellow shared this sky, while Blue dominated the other side of the world. Sherret shaded his eyes with an orange hand and stared back into orange distances. He'd come five miles, maybe, and the ship was becoming difficult to pick out. There were conical rocks around it, and possibly the shape he thought was the ship's nose was in fact merely a rock.

When it came to it, a man felt lonely when he left the community he'd lived among for so long. He must take what comfort he could from the foreknowledge that the community was soon to dissolve into chaos, conflict, and possibly bloodshed.

He must make his own way.

So far he'd met, to speak to, only two Amarans, although he had seen others carefully not seeing him in the middle distance. The local Amarans had mostly steered clear of the humans since the obtuse Brewster had shot a fat and iridescent bird and brought it home for the cooking pot.

It turned out to be a Council Member in a colony of a highly intelligent species of Bird-Amarans. The blunder was, on the surface, forgiven, because there were Birds and birds on Amara, and the latter were truly bird-brained. Nevertheless, the Bird-Amarans afterwards made it plain that they classed humans with their lesser brethren so far as intelligence went. And they did not fly within gunshot again.

All other intelligent Amarans also kept their distance. The two types of Amarans with whom the humans could be said to have established any contact were both humanoid and weak-minded.

The Paddies and the Jackies.

It was a Paddy whom Sherret first encountered on his trek. A hairy, stocky creature with a low gradient forehead and an ape-like shamble. Thick was the adjective for him—thick in build, speech, and head.

He greeted Sherret surlily: "Don't kill me, human, because if you do I shall kill you."

This was a typical sort of remark by a Paddy. Hence the sobriquet.

Sherret smiled. "Don't be afraid. I'm only out for a walk. Have you ever been to Na-Abiza?"

"Yes, I have, human, but I didn't get there."

"Why not?"

"Because it wasn't there when I got there."

"But you just said you didn't get there."

"Of course I didn't, human, if it wasn't there."

"Well, is it there now?"

"How can I tell? I'm here, not there."

Sherret laughed and abandoned the attempt. This could go on for hours. The Earthmen had tried to learn something of the nature of the flora and fauna of Amara by questioning Paddies. It was small wonder that they had by now reached a state of utter confusion. Life-forms here were certainly weird, and perhaps Irishisms were unavoidable in trying to describe them.

He bade the Paddy goodbye and walked on.



He ran into the Jackie a mile further on. When a Jackie stood upright he was, on the average, eight feet tall. As his spine was rubbery he seldom stood upright. Fleshless, gangling people they were, hinged at every point. The jaw-hinge was particularly notable. When a Jackie laughed, the top half of his head lifted clear away. And always Jackies laughed.

"Jackie" was a diminutive of jackass.

"Good morning," said Sherret.

The Jackie at once became convulsed with laughter. Jackies laughed at the slightest thing. Until you realised that, you tended to re-examine what you'd said. Perhaps you *had* said something funny. Or foolish.

Come to think of it, Sherret reflected, it certainly was foolish to wish anyone good morning on Amara. For there was no morning. Nor afternoon, nor evening, nor night. It was always day—of a kind.

In time the Jackie recovered, and asked: "Where are you going, human?"

"Na-Abiza."

Sherret waited patiently for the laugh to die away. "Abiza," in what seemed to be the common language of Amara (for even the Bird-Amarans shrilled it) was a verb as well as a place name. The verb described a bodily function. "Na" meant, variously no, negative, or unable.

"Na-Abiza" could mean constipation. Naturally, the Jackie saw it that way. When he'd laughed his fill, became relatively untwisted and almost human again, the Jackie said: "I wish you a pleasant journey. But beware of those who have only two, of those who became three, of that which becomes many."

"Thanks a lot," said Sherret. "But do you really have to be so cryptic?"

There was nothing funny in this question, but the Jackie thought there was and again was overtaken by idiotic mirth. This sort of reaction could become very irritating, and impatiently Sherret strode on. The braying became fainter in the thorny brush behind him.

Eventually he left the thorn belt, crossed an ankle-twisting area of loose rock, then climbed a ridge from which the rocks had rolled. It was there he paused for a parting look back at the ship—if it was the ship.

He had come this far in this direction before, but he had only a rough notion of the terrain beyond the ridge. Somewhere there was a lake whose western edge he would have to skirt. He went on to the crest and then along it for some distance until he came to a high promontory. He scaled it.

From the summit he took survey. A plain stretched to the horizon. A small section of the horizon was thickened by a bright orange streak. That was the lake. He took a bearing, then picked his way down to the plain.

It was featureless and seemed interminable. Coarse grass matted it. Sometimes he walked springily over the thick tangle. Sometimes his foot sank into a loose patch of it and the grass wound itself around his boot as if it were trying to drag him below ground.

A breeze sprang up and rapidly strengthened to a wind. The grass stirred like the fur on a moving beast and the wind extracted a whistling tune from its rough stalks. From over the ridge behind him a ball of cloud came sailing on the wind, like an immense balloon. In Amara's skies the rare clouds almost always formed compact balls—no-one could explain why.

The twin pools of this one's shadows came sliding, far apart, across the plain. One of them overtook Sherret. Briefly, Yellow was eclipsed, and it was as though Sherret had been plunged into a corner of the Inferno. Everything was fire-red.

The shadow passed. Later he glimpsed it traversing the lake like a moving patch of bright arterial blood. Then the other shadow, moving afar off and so seemingly more slowly, turned the lake water into molten gold as it went.

The cloud sank like a satellite over the horizon. The wind lost force and became feeble and directionless.

Sherret resolved to reach the lakeside and there have his first meal and a rest. He struggled on across the unfriendly grass for so long without seeming to get anywhere that he half persuaded himself that the lake was a mirage receding before him.

Then the grass began to cling damply rather than fiercely and he was ploughing into the marshy verge. He halted. There was no definite edge to the lake : he was merely walking into it gradually. He squelched back and found a reasonably dry spot, spread a waterproof, rested a while, then opened his big rucksack.

Captain Maxton had played fair. There was enough concentrated food to last an Earth month. Also plenty of more tasty fare, including sardine sandwiches. There was whisky. Several utensils. And, in a shining plastic container, a delicate compass with a map folded within a lid compartment.

The magnetic field of Amara being what it was, the compass needed to be delicate.

The Captain had also supplied a machete, to double duty as implement and weapon, a battery-powered electric needle pistol, and a case of small but powerful hand grenades. And the comment: "Hope you won't need to use these. But you never know what you might bump into."

## Chapter Two

Sherret bit hugely at a sandwich and studied the map. Its lines ran off into the unknown about ten miles north-west of the lake. On the other side of the blank space the contours of Na-Abiza were sketched in. He had only to keep plugging on north-north-west until he encountered them.

He put the map, such as it was, back in the compass box and picked up another sandwich. Immediately, from somewhere up in the sky there came a terrible scream.

He started, and looked up.

The scream was coming from a black, winged dot. The dot grew bigger. It was hurtling down at him. As it came, the scream rose in intensity rapidly. It was like having skewers stuck into his ears. The short sound waves seemed to pierce his skull like hard radiation.

He flung himself face-down on the waterproof, pressing the heel of his palm tight over each ear. This must be a Tek-bird. The Jackies had cackled about such a species. Its paralysing attack cry could split the very sutures of the skull, they said, and thought it a highly humorous end.

In fact, it was far from a joke. Sherret found himself screaming with agony. "Stop, stop, stop!" shrieked his voice inside his skull, which indeed felt as though it were cracking like an egg.

There came a strong backwash of air. The scream began dropping in pitch from the Doppler effect. Then it cut off abruptly.

It left his head singing. Slowly, he sat up, feeling dazed and bilious.

He looked around apprehensively. The Tek-Bird was climbing after its swoop and veering round. He feared another swoop—and there was no cover for miles. What did it seek? His eyes? His food?

He glanced anxiously over his little scatter of possessions. The food hadn't been touched. But the compass box was missing—and the compass with it.

The Tek-bird, sweeping round in a flat loop, was heading back in his direction. He cringed. But it continued to fly level. As it neared he saw it was a huge, leathery creature like a pterodactyl. In its toothed beak the plastic compass box glinted.

Sherret found himself on his feet, yelling and waving.

"Drop that, damn you! Drop it, or by—"

He remembered his needle-gun and drew it. His hands were shaking stupidly. He took a pot-shot at the bird. The needle sang away far off target. The Tek-bird flapped by unconcernedly a hundred feet above him and headed out over the lake. He shot twice more, ineffectively.

Then suddenly the bird went into a steep dive. It plunged like a gannet into the lake, taking the compass box with it. There was hardly a splash. The bird was a practiced diver.

Cursing, he waited for it to re-appear. It did not.

A tortured hour dragged by. The lake surface remained unbroken. Tek-birds, it seemed, nested under water. Doubtless the compass box was tucked away down there together with other shiny objects which this sonic menace with the jackdaw instincts had collected.

Sherret lost hope. The map was small loss. But the compass . . . Without it he was disorientated. No stars could ever shine in Amara's glowing skies. The crazy motion of the planet around the Three Suns made it far from easy to guess direction from them.

Of course, he could go back to the ship—and Maxton.

That would mean accepting Goffism. Maxton wouldn't fit him out all over again.

Or he could push on hopefully in what he knew at the moment to be roughly the right direction. He sighed and chose that. After all, he might meet an occasional Jackie, or even a Paddy, with just enough sense to indicate the way.

He plodded round the lake to the western side and struck off on a line he remembered from the map.

The Jackie's apparently pointless remark kept going through his mind : *Beware of those who have only two, of those who become three, of that which becomes many.*

Those who have only two what ?

Who or what were those that became three ? Three what ?

As for that which became many . . . The whole rigmarole was unlike the usual run of Jackass remarks and yet was just as senseless.

There another odd remark by a Jackie which he and the crew conjectured about until they abandoned it as poetic nonsense or a mistranslation : " May you live until the slow burn eats its tail."

A " slow burn " was archaic English slang, but obviously there could be no connection in this instance.

He thought about it but in the end could only abandon it again.

He walked for hours, until his feet were sore, and then he walked some more and the soreness wore off. A pair of Jackies cackled at him but gave him a wide berth. He saw a high speck which might have been a tek-bird, and hid beneath a smooth-barked tree until the speck vanished. When he tried to move, he found his jacket was caught. The smooth bark had put forth two protuberances like the pincers of an earwig—but as large as fingers and as firm as steel. They had met neatly through the hem.

He tore himself away and didn't linger to experiment. Let some more leisured explorer in time to come collect this specimen for his arboretum.

He made a mental note not to sleep under any similar trees. Conceivably, those claws could meet through a man's throat.

He slept instead on a small plateau of bare rock.

He awoke to a sky predominantly yellow and to a sense of confusion about direction. From his little eminence he surveyed his surroundings. He spied, far away on the world's verge, a peculiar something. If it were a tree, it must be miles high, with a translucent trunk and a great, fuzzy, dark mass of foliage.

If he made for it, it would at least keep him headed in a straight line across territory he'd not yet traversed. Weighing

things up, he thought Na-Abiza must lay somewhere in that quarter.

Almost as soon as he began walking he became aware of a distant mutter of thunder, as though a war were in progress just over the horizon.

He walked quickly, sleep-refreshed, and covered several miles. The peculiar object was even further away than it had seemed. Although it had grown taller and larger, he still couldn't decide what it was. The tree (to call it that) appeared to have grown from the ground at a wind blown angle. The trunk glimmered with light. And the thunder was definitely coming from it—loudly now.

He paused for lunch, squatting, chewing, regarding this thing on the horizon.

*Whee-smack !* He started with alarm

A rod about eighteen inches long and an inch in diameter was sticking vertically in the dry earth an arm's length from him. It was so palely yellow that he could see that its colour wasn't inherent, but reflection. In a white light, it would be white.

It had dropped from an empty sky with the velocity of a rocket. Therefore, it must have started from an immense height.

He looked up, apprehensively. The object could have brained him. Was it intended to do so ?

The sky remained empty.

He reached out and touched the thing gingerly. He imagined it would be warm from air friction, but it was unduly cold, almost icy. He wrenched it from the ground. It wasn't metal but rather like stone.

The more he handled it, the warmer and softer it became. Soon it bent near the middle and fell apart. The contents ran. He dropped the pieces with a cry of disgust. Bird-lime wasn't anything unusual in itself. Neither was water vapour, which formed the ball-clouds. What kept catching you out on Amara were the shapes, amounts, and the manner of presentation of basically familiar substances.

He used much of his drinking water in cleaning up. He'd lost all taste for his meal and left it.

Somewhere near the stratosphere, beyond eyeshot, some species of birds, obviously large and heavy, somehow maintained flight. Either there was a layer of dense air up there,

formed by some meteorological freak, or else the birds had some kind of supplementary support. He pictured a sort of winged gasbag . . .

Just another doodle, he told himself, and walked on, fighting a tendency to cower in anticipation of any further offerings from the heavens.

His apprehension lost itself in wonder as he drew nearer to the immense phenomenon that from afar had looked tree-shaped.

It was no tree. It wasn't even solid. The fuzzy dark mass surmounting it was the biggest cloud ever—miles in diameter. Roughly globular, its edges were whirling mist. It was condensing on a great scale at the bottom, and the rain was pouring torrentially down at an angle in a concentrated stream, jetting on to the land. Yet the cloud maintained a uniform density. As fast as it lost water it absorbed more invisible moisture from the atmosphere.

By what mysterious magnetism this stationary focal point, miles above the ground, drew its unending supply was another mystery of the Three Suns system. And the confined path of the rain was yet another. There were forces here hitherto not encountered by man.

The yellowy light shone through the jet, straight as a glass drain, and clusters of air bubbles glinted in their swift, slanting passage.

The thunder was really heavy now, shock waves riding with the sound waves. The ground vibrated.

The cloud hung over the land like a foreshadowing of doomsday, but the bright, shimmering gold shaft which sprang from it pierced the atmosphere of menace like a message of hope. A golden mist enfolded and hid its base.

Awestruck, Sherret went on and entered the mist at last. It was fine spray and soon soaked him. The tiny globules danced to the organ roar of the rushing water. Presently he found himself at the lip of a valley. Its lower slopes plunged into a restless sea of spray. They were so steep that the valley was practically a canyon.

He followed the edge of it for a mile or so, and the mist thinned enough for him to get the general picture. The cloud must have been spouting for an eternity. This deep valley had been worn into shape by hurtling water through innumerable centuries. It was dead straight and, canal-like, ruled a line to the horizon.

Sherret paused to consider. He had something more than two hundred and fifty miles yet to cover on the trek to Na-Abiza. This mad river was rushing pretty much in the direction he thought he should follow. If it kept headed that way, he might get a free ride.

If he had a boat. But Captain Maxton hadn't thought to supply one.

He resumed his way thoughtfully. A few miles on the valley sides became slightly less precipitous. Down near the water's edge bushes began to make an appearance. Further on they were bigger and sturdier : some of the branches were as thick as his wrist.

He chose a point and made a careful way down to it. He slid here and there but didn't fall. The water slid by very fast over its smooth bed. Hard to judge its speed, for there were few ripples and no flotsam. About twenty miles an hour, maybe.

He dumped his rucksack and tested his machete on a nearby bush. It chopped cleanly. The wood was hard and rather sapless. He began to cut reasonably straight lengths. Among his supplies there was plenty of cord and even climbing rope. He began to make a raft. Although it was a small one, its binding consumed a surprising amount of cordage. He ended up with a solitary short length of rope.

He saved the longest branch for use in navigation.

After a full meal, he set about the launching, wearing his pack lest it be swept away. Gingerly, he pushed an edge of the raft into the water. It was almost wrenched from him. He'd underestimated the speed of the torrent. It must be well over thirty miles an hour.

With the last piece of rope he moored the raft to a firm-rooted bush. Then he heaved the raft into the water. It strained like a wild dog on a leash. The bush was yanked almost horizontal and groaned like a live creature.

He clambered hastily on to the raft, balanced himself, turned to slice through the painter with the machete. As he was poised to strike, the rope snapped with a twang. Off shot the raft and over he went on his back, feet in the air, the long branch across his chest.

He tried to hold on to everything at once : the branch, the machete, and the cords of the raft. He could see the high walls of the valley sliding rapidly by. The air streamed over him. The yellow sky looked down at him blankly.



Since there was no one to laugh at him, he laughed at himself, rather breathlessly. Then squirmed himself round on to hands and knees.

It was all right. The raft was riding high, buoyantly, straight along the straight way, and there were no rocks in sight.

He settled himself more comfortably, prepared to accept whatever this mystery tour may bring.

After some hours it had brought stiffness to his joints and very little variety. A fast but dullish trip. The biggest mystery about this tour, to his mind, was that he'd seen no signs of life beyond occasional birds. One would have thought that a body of water like this would have some people dwelling beside it. Admittedly it could scarcely be compared with, say, the Nile, because Amara was far from being a desert and there were plenty of lakes.

But . . . no single hut, not even a lone being, in perhaps a hundred and fifty miles along a direct line.

He found himself hoping pretty hard that he *was* heading for Na-Abiza and human company. Just now he felt so isolated that even the sight of Captain Maxton wouldn't be unwelcome.

How far did this watercourse run? Should he regain the shore now or ride on for a few more hours? For all he knew he might be riding to the sudden brink of a waterfall roaring down into some great pit—Amara had a penchant for the unexpected.

He hoped the water wouldn't do any such foolish thing. From the signs, it was hardly likely. It was losing its impetuosity. At first, he had had to half close his eyes against the air resistance. Now the breeze only ruffled his hair. The valley was steadily widening. Its slopes lost height as the water lost speed.

Greenness was stealing into the sky as Amara slowly turned this hemisphere towards Blue. There was still more of Yellow than Blue as yet, though, and the green was pale and cold and seemed to Sherret to emphasise his loneliness.

All right, he told himself, I'm a gregarious misanthrope. Not temperamentally a polar explorer nor solitary mountaineer. Nor yet a chronic party-goer. It's just that I like to have someone around to exchange ideas with. Without some sort of human relationship I begin to feel lost, that nothing's really real.

The only test of one's actual existence is the response of another mind. Granted, in the ultimate analysis we're all only dream-fragments.

*All that we see or seem.*

*Is but a dream within a dream.*

All the same, the company of the crew of Bagshaw's *Pegasus*—he knew many of them—was becoming a need. If he were right about its direction, the river would carry him far faster to them than his own feet would. He decided to stick with the raft a few hours longer.

In the event, the few hours became many. The river, which had sprung so eagerly from its magical source, gradually lost spirit after the valley had dwindled away. Sluggishly, it spread itself thin over flat country and began to sink into the earth.

Seeing that the trip was nearing its end, Sherret had been trying to pole the raft to the nearer bank. It was exhausting work. The river bed was muddy and clung like glue to his awkward branch, which finally stuck hard and snapped off.

The raft drifted and eventually became bogged down in thick ooze.

### Chapter Three

Sherret took stock of his position. It was hard to guess how far he had come, especially as he'd dozed a couple of times on the raft. Perhaps some two hundred and fifty miles, all told. Which left something around fifty miles yet to go.

And the initial three miles looked like being the worst, for he was all of that distance from the bank. Three miles of dark, clinging mud.

He poked about with the broken branch and ascertained that the ooze was about knee-deep. He ate, rested, then lowered himself gently from the raft. He tried to move and it was as though his legs were bound in wet sheets. His speed averaged a yard a minute. At that rate it would take eighty-eight hours to reach the bank (he worked it out during one of his frequent rests), unless he made better progress.

He plugged on grimly. He could only hope that he would soon strike some firmer ground, if only in patches. He knew he would just as likely step in a hole and be smothered to death.

The sky was bottle-green, and darkening.

An eternity later, a wet slimy creature wriggled on its stomach from the last reaches of the mud-swamp and feebly grasped grass-tufts rooted in dry earth. It clung to them as though they symbolised everything that was most precious. Which they did : safety, an anchorage, rest.

The creature, which had once been an erect and confident human being, was now witless, drained of thought and almost of life. But it could still feel, though all it felt was pain. Every single leg muscle felt as though its fibres were torn to shreds by the thousands of fights to free the limb from sucking mud.

Boots and socks the mud had claimed, the manhood had been lost with them. But a creature had survived.

The sky was turning an ominous purple.

In the deepest indigo light Amara could produce, a man-creature was slumped, half-sitting, against the bole of a solitary fruit tree to which he had dragged himself. The fruit wasn't the attraction : he was beyond hunger. He was still following a blind instinct to clutch at roots.

The mud had caked hard on his face, though he was unaware of it. Mentally, he was still battling against liquid mud. His brain seemed choked with it. His thought moved with the greatest difficulty, too weak to link up.

Dully he was aware of a faint, pale oblong somewhere in the near distance. Presently, he began to concentrate on it, simply to establish a mental focal point again.

A house ? But it seemed so insubstantial. Perhaps it was a trick of this dim light but the oblong looked filmy, semi-transparent. A house of glass ?

But who could have built a house of glass on Amara, where building was at a primitive level ? So far as was known. That qualification must always be added : so little of Amara was known.

In a little while, when he had recovered some strength, he would go and investigate the pale shape.

Suddenly, there snapped into being, only a few yards away and plainly solid and real, another fruit tree. He stared at it. It seemed as firmly rooted as the one he reclined against.

Now his curiosity was engaged and his mind began to work of its own volition, albeit slowly. About a foot above his head there jutted a stubby little branch. If he could reach it and pull himself to his feet . . .

Somehow he did so, through a series of small deliberate movements. He had achieved the status *Pithecanthropus erectus*, at least, and might yet become a man again. He looked around slowly—and then clung more tightly to the little branch.

For six more fruit trees, all exactly similar, had joined the other, confronting him in a tight arc.

His brain whirled. Fear stirred in him. He knew he was in serious danger yet couldn't define the threat. He had to get away from here.

He set his teeth and let go of the branch. He stood freely but swaying. Then two further trees created themselves soundlessly before him.

The fruit of all these trees looked like black plums. In another light they could have been, say, red. For no reason he felt sure they were poisonous.

Beyond the trees the pale oblong glimmered indistinctly. Again for no reason he felt sure it was a house. The safety he'd sought so desperately didn't lie under this tree. But if he could reach the house . . .

More trees sprang from nowhere, between him and that possible sanctuary.

Steadily he was being hemmed in by a small, dense wood.

A vague memory of the fate of Macbeth floated into his mind. When Birnam Wood came to Dunsinane, it brought the prophesied doom with it.

He took a shaky pace forward. A tree leapt up in his path. He clung to it weakly—to the seemingly identical branch he had just relinquished. He manoeuvred around the bole, tried to walk on.

Another tree barred his way and stopped him in his tracks.  
*Beware . . . of that which becomes many.*

What use were warnings whose meanings you learned when it was too late?

These trees were deliberately blocking his way to the house. Very well, he would head away from the house, back along the margin of the swamp. He turned, intending to go that way. Almost as if they'd read his mind, five more trees appeared like a palisade before him.

Wearily he detached the machete from his belt and swung at the nearest tree. And again. A tiny chip went flying. He had

merely nicked the tree. What little energy he had recovered began already to ebb. Felling the tree was far beyond him.

The trees were tall and clasped their branches closely to themselves in the manner of a poplar. He thought, so long as I stay close to the boles I'll always be able to sidle between them, however many trees there are, because their branches will keep them a little apart.

He turned again towards the house, intent upon trying this method.

*Cr-runch.* Two further trees arrived, their branches groaning and creaking as they intermeshed. Leaves and broken pieces fell about him.

This seemed to confirm that his thoughts were being read and his every intention consciously frustrated.

A weak fury spurred him to try to shoulder his way between these two latest arrivals. It was impossible. The gap was too narrow.

It made him realise that even if he were physically fit, there could be no escape from the trap closing about him.

He lost his head and made a series of wild dashes in different directions. The air was full of the sound of the cracking, clashing, and breaking of branches.

Arms flailing, he rebounded from bole after bole. When one arm was caught between a pair of them snapping into objectivity simultaneously, he cried aloud in fright and despair. If this mad multiplication continued he would be crushed to death fairly soon.

Sweating, he wrenched his arm free after a struggle. The effort burned away his last drop of energy. He collapsed from sheer weakness. The side of his head thumped hard against one of a compact circle of trees.

The purple world darkened into night—for him.

Sherret didn't believe in ghosts but he had to believe in this one because he saw it. He knew it was a ghost because it was as transparent as lace and wore a shroud. Although he lay helpless before it, it didn't scare him because it was the ghost of a beautiful woman.

There was no colour to her cheeks, eyes, or lips but they conveyed expression clearly enough. The ghost was both concerned and hopeful. Obviously she was concerned about him. What she was hopeful about was less obvious.

She had a ghost of a voice—a sweet whisper. She spoke to him and he heard himself answering. But what either of them said or in what language he had no idea. It was a murmur of voices heard in the distance in an opium dream. He felt detached from them. Only one thing emerged clearly: her name was Rosala.

He was lying relaxed and at peace in a purple twilight and Rosala was standing over him.

Then she reached down and laid a finger on his shoulder. He couldn't feel the touch of it. He seemed unable to make any movement himself. Although he felt as though he were still reclining on his back, his body drifted gently upwards a little way. He was floating on air, her finger still on his shoulder.

So he must be a ghost, too, and this must be the next world. It was strange but not frightening. Indeed, it became amusing when Rosala began to push him along through the air, still using only the one finger, as though he were some kind of human balloon . . .

They came to a garden which even in this murky light looked lovely. There were wide lawns, and flowers drained of brightness by the dim illumination, and an ornamental pool that seemed full of black ink. There was a lot of statuary at the pool's edge and spaced about the lawns. It looked odd. Some of it was plainly as substantial as marble, but the rest of it was as ghostly and tenuous as Rosala herself . . . and as the pale oblong they were now approaching, which was the side of a many-windowed house.

The main door was large, open, and flanked by a pair of indubitably solid sculptures of naked women, life-size and life-like. As he passed between them, he saw that they both had the same face.

It was Rosala's.

Then he passed into a blinding white light and closed his eyes against the dazzle of it. Almost at once he fell asleep. He dreamed, and the dreams were confusing but seemed very real, while they lasted. Intermittently there came patches of unconsciousness where there were no dreams.

He was always glad to emerge from them and find Rosala there. She was the one constant in a giddy flux. At least, she was unchanging until he found he could change her.

Within the house she never wore the robe he'd naively assumed to be a shroud. She was as unadorned as her twin

likenesses guarding the door. Her figure was well-rounded and pleasing, but rather too full for his taste, like the Velasquez Venus. The thighs plump almost to fatness and the hips a trifle overwide.

Watching her, he let his imagination slim her somewhat at waist and hips. And, lo, she became slimmer before his eyes. This was a really pleasant dream.

But she was now out of proportion. He had to reduce her bosom, then fine down her limbs to slim elegance.

Sculpturing in flesh was a fascinating occupation. She didn't seem to mind it in the least, and was always smiling at him and talking to him. They had long conversations. It was queer, but he was never able to recollect what they were about. And, indeed, while they were in progress he hardly knew what he was saying.

He was never conscious of eating or drinking, but he supposed he must be absorbing sustenance for he felt neither hunger nor thirst. He supposed he must now be capable of movement, for he kept finding himself in different parts of the house, though with no memory of having walked to them.

He had only the vaguest idea of the house. He knew it was extensive, and that the biggest room, where they spent most of the time, was a kind of studio. There were paintings on the walls and standing on easels. There were several large blocks of stone, some partially carved.

Rosala was both painter and sculptress, yet he never saw her handle brush or chisel.

It was strange that he knew her name but couldn't recall his own. He had a suspicion that this was because he hadn't a full title to one. He wasn't a complete personality, only a detached fragment of one. The rest—the bulk—of him was elsewhere.

Who, and where, was the real he ?

It was a puzzle without answer in a timeless, meaningless existence.

Then suddenly, without the slightest warning, full consciousness struck him. There was a sunburst in the mind.

In the strong white light which permeated Rosala's house all objects became as hard, brilliant, and strikingly colourful as though he were seeing them under the influence of mescaline.

He knew that he was Alexander Sherret, and he remembered very clearly his adventures on the trek to Na-Abiza up to the

point where he fell and crashed his head against something hard. After that, things remained hazy.

That part of him who had had long talks with Rosala was still absent, lost in some blind alley of the memory.

However, here he stood now in the centre of the studio, in slippers and a blue velvety gown with a golden cord gathering in the waist. He felt vitally alive and strong. He walked across the glassy floor, which contained intertwining ribbons of colours, moving slowly like snakes, in its depths, to a wall mirror.

He looked well, too, and had grown an impressive, rust-red beard. He fingered it, and touched more tenderly the still sore place above his right ear. A slight lump remained there.

He noticed an easel and inspected the painting thereon. It sent a little shock of disquiet through him. In purple monochrome it stylistically displayed the pattern of a man trapped, grotesquely twisted, and crushed amid a cluster of tall, smooth pillars. Although contorted in pain and fright, the face was recognisably his. The pillars, presumably, were the trees simplified.

As he regarded it, unconsciously he began a new habit : a nervous tugging at his beard.

A pair of ivory-white, perfectly moulded arms stole around his shoulders from behind. A honeyed voice whispered in his ear, in Amaran with an attractive, unfamiliar accent.

"Ah, my Ulysses, you said you never wanted to look at it again. But it fascinates you, doesn't it ? Art is stronger than our fears or desires. Didn't I always tell you that ?"

He disengaged himself awkwardly and turned to look into Rosala's smiling eyes. They were his favourite shade of blue. She was an ash-blonde ; he had a weakness for the Scandinavian type.

He said in an undertone : "How could anyone so lovely as you create anything so horrible as that ?"

She pouted childishly. "Create ? I didn't create it. An artist only receives and records impressions."

"Art is selection, Rosala. You could have selected more worthy impressions than these. This picture is gloating sadism. You must be a cruel woman."

She stared at him strangely. "You can believe that ?"

"I don't know. I only know I loathe this picture."



She took a deep breath. "Very well," she said, in a steely voice, startlingly different from her former tone. She thrust past him and punched at the canvas with both fists. There was strength in those smooth arms. They smashed the painting to a torn ruin.

She turned on him with an angrily flushed face.

"Perhaps you—" she began, but on impulse he seized her, hugged her, and smothered her with kisses. She didn't resist but returned his kisses with passion. He observed, belatedly and with wry amusement, that she was quite naked. From the assured and easy way he fondled her, it was apparent that this had happened many times, that his muscles and nervous system remembered what he did not.

"Ulysses," she murmured, full of love.

"Why do you call me Ulysses?"

She stood back, holding him at arm's length, and looked searchingly at him.

"Darling, you are talking strangely. Something has happened. What is it? Have the bad dreams come back?"

"Bad dreams?"

"That picture which you call sadistic didn't come from my mind. Nor from reality. Only from your imagination. It was *our* picture. Your conception, my execution. We were exercising your bad dreams. Once expressed externally, in paint, we hoped they would cease to haunt you."

"I don't remember that, Rosala. I'm afraid I've . . . lost touch. You'll have to help me. Let me tell you what I can remember. Then you can fill in the gaps."

## Chapter Four

He took her hand, led her to a couch nearby. They settled among cushions, and while she watched him wonderingly, he told her all he could remember, the things seen through a glass darkly.

Afterwards, she said: "It's strange to have to tell you again these things. I'm Rosala—yes, you were right about the name. When I asked your name, you did not say 'Sherret'" (she pronounced it 'Sherry') but 'Ulysses.' And at first you called me 'Circe,' I don't know why. But later, 'Rosala.'

"One day I was walking sadly in my house, knowing that neither it nor I had much longer to live. I was wondering how

long was left, whether it was worth starting another painting. Or whether I could ever paint again. Then I looked out of the window and saw you being trapped by the Melas tree.

"Then you fell and lost your senses. So I went and brought you here. I felt sorry for you and sorry for the Melas tree, too, that I should deprive it of further companions. Still, it had done very well from you. I was glad of that. The Melas trees and we Petrans have a bond of sympathy, something in common which distinguishes us from all other living things on Amara."

Sherret raised an eyebrow, and she paused.

"However," she resumed, "Melas trees can live together in a community. The one beyond my garden, by the river, was unfortunate. It was isolated. Now it isn't any more. It's become a community because of the accident of your coming. But we Petrans can't live with each other for long. We have nothing to give one another. We must live alone, and die alone, unless—"

She broke off, and stroked his arm gently. Almost possessively, Sherret thought, with vague alarm.

"There aren't many of us. We live near the river. And the Melas trees grow only by the river, too. Most Amarans are afraid to come near us. Lee wasn't afraid. He was a real man, although sometimes he lost confidence in himself."

"Lee? Who was Lee?"

"He was the man who lived with me before you came."

Sherret sat up straight, suddenly, and frowned down at her. Her beautiful white body lay at careless ease upon the bright cushions. Her profile, with the high brow, straight nose, firm little chin, was upturned as she gazed at the lofty and domed ceiling. Obviously she was remembering Lee with affection.

Or perhaps with more than affection.

"You were lovers?" Sherret asked, and was surprised at the condemnatory note that rang through the last word. He'd never thought of himself as a puritan. Perhaps a Calvinistic streak had been inherited from his Scottish ancestors.

"Of course. I have loved all the men who have lived with me."

"Well, I'll be damned! You promiscuous little baggage!"

That phrase didn't translate into Amaran. The result implied unfaithfulness.

She sat up abruptly, too, and stared at him with wide, horrified eyes. Then she clawed at his face, with vigour. The beard saved him from the worst of the attack but the blood dripped from scratches near his eyes.

He swore, jumping to his feet and flinging her back on the couch. He dabbed at the wounds with the back of one hand.

"That's a wicked temper, you have Rosala. I can guess why none of your men would stay on with you. Or . . . did you kill them?"

Her eyes shone like blue fire.

She lifted an arm and pointed at him. It was as though a cannonball had hit him in the chest. He went flying on to his back on the glacial floor and slid for some feet over the slowly writhing shapes beneath it.

He lay still for a moment, whooping. Then he sat up slowly, hands pressed to his sore breast-bone. From the couch she regarded him, the fire of hate gone. She looked like a petulant child.

"Technical knock-out," wheezed Sherret, and laughed breathlessly.

At once she ran over to him, knelt and embraced him.

"Sherry, I'm sorry. Oh, Sherry—"

"No, my pet, I'm to blame," said Sherret, caressing her.

Between kisses she said softly: "Only wicked Petrans . . . live with more than one man . . . at a time. I always had . . . only the one. So I couldn't be . . . unfaithful. I loved them all . . . but only some of them loved me . . . Perhaps none of them did. For they all left me . . . in the end. I think Lee loved me . . . and will come back to me . . . when he has proved himself."

Sherret felt a stab of jealousy about Lee. He stood up, picked her up—she was surprisingly light—and carried her back to the couch.

He said, perplexedly: "I'm in a whirl. I don't understand your way of life. I was angry with you because I love you, and I was jealous of those other men."

She ripped a piece of cloth from a cushion, licked it wet, and gently cleaned up his blood-smeared face. He was amused by her method and a little touched by her concern. Even though she would have done as much for Lee—and perhaps had done, if they had fought in the same way.

"Did you ever fight with Lee?" he asked, suddenly.

She avoided his gaze. "Yes."

"Who won?"

"I lost," she sighed. "For he left me."

"But that was to prove himself, didn't you say?"

"Yes. He had to. He might have stayed if I hadn't been so foolish. I annoyed him so much sometimes that he tried to beat me."

"But you wouldn't let him. You knocked him down with your pocket thunderbolt. What are you—an electric eel?"

She didn't understand the reference, and let it pass. "Yes, I was foolish. He came here seeking self-respect, and I tried to help him—and I did, too. And then I would lose my temper and undo all I'd built up. But perhaps he would have gone on his way eventually, all the same. He said he must face the most dangerous creatures on this planet, stand up to them, and survive. Only then, he said, could he call himself a man."

"What are these dangerous creatures?"

"They're called the Three-people. I've never seen them and never want to. They live in the pass between the mountains in the north-west. Only fools or heroes go there. The fools never return. The heroes return seldom. And when they do, they have become fools. They've lost their wits and rave wildly about the Three-people. But nothing they say makes any sense any more. Their minds have gone . . . Lee said he would come back to me. Perhaps he meant to. Sometimes I fear he'll never return. Sometimes I fear he will . . . as a poor crazy man."

Sherret ran his fingers through his hair, a little wearily.

"Amara gets altogether too bizarre for me at times. Now and then I think I might be able to piece it all together. And then again I think the pieces were never meant to fit—they belong to different jigsaw puzzles. Nothing joins on to anything. Melas trees and Petrans and Three-people . . . Have you ever heard the expression 'Beware of those who become three'?"

"Yes, it's a common saying. It relates to the Three-people."

"But how do they become 'three'?"

"I don't know, Sherry. Let us forget them. Let's talk about . . . oh, the Melas trees."

"All right, tell me about them."

Long ago, she said, the Melas tree was a simple fruit-bearing tree which flourished in this part of the country in a perfectly normal way. The birds ate of its fruit and carried its seeds far and wide.

Then the species was attacked by a pernicious blight which all but killed it off. Its fruit became poisonous: only the ignorant devoured it—and died. Moreover, the seeds had lost the vital reproductive power, except for the occasional throw-back or sport. The lone tree near the house must have sprung from an odd exception of this kind, the seed having been carried there by some creature perhaps at the cost of its life.

But the Melas trees had a tremendously strong instinct for survival. Paradoxically, the disease caused a mutation which aided survival. Some chemical change in the sap enormously stimulated the primitive awareness which all plants possess and which is weakly telepathic.

The Melas tree's consciousness became strongly telepathic, but lacked hindsight or foresight. Yet it was aware that past and future states existed, and it knew that humanoid creatures were conscious of them.

It found a way of using the humanoid brain as a medium for reproducing itself. *Literally* reproducing itself. For in the humanoid mind there was foreknowledge of the Melas tree's continued existence tomorrow. And tomorrow. and tomorrow and tomorrow. A Melas tree existing in millions of future instants of time.

The Melas tree, living for the instant, conceived of these multitudinous future states of itself as separate, *other* trees living in the instant. Desperately it sought to connect with them. And did so, through another's mind.

The tree's sphere of influence didn't extend beyond the reach of its branches. Any humanoid who strayed beneath them became a victim. Even so, the tree's control was limited. If the humanoid was contemplating the past or present or was unconscious, it was useless to the tree. For the past was unalterable, the present couldn't be duplicated, an unconscious mind couldn't be contacted. Only the future was malleable.

Once the humanoid mind became forward-looking, extrapolating into the future, even if for a distance of only a few seconds, the tree would reach through, contact its future self, and snatch it into the present.

"For heaven's sake, *how*?" asked Sherret.

"Nobody knows."

"Well, then, how do you know all this other stuff about the Melas tree?"

"Some very wise men have stayed under this roof," said Rosala, archly.

"H'm. Some of it is very likely true. Certainly, every time I contemplated making a movement, or a sequence of movements, a tree materialised—sometimes in batches. You can't make a movement without thinking about it first, however fleetingly. But did they have to keep barring my way?"

"Of course, darling. They didn't want you to escape until they'd used your mind to the limit."

"But they were trying to crush me to death."

"No. That was only your fear. They were trying to form a stockade round you, and keep you imprisoned in it."

"Then I should have starved to death."

"Eventually. That's what usually happens. But by then you would have helped create a whole forest of Melas trees."

"Some consolation! How did you save me, Rosala?"

"Partly you saved yourself, by becoming unconscious. They couldn't complete the barrier around you. I got you out."

"Why should you be immune from their influence? To get me, you must have walked beneath their branches."

Rosala bit her lip, and was silent for a moment. Then she said, quietly: "At that time I was in no condition to be of use to them. I hardly existed. I was a shadow."

Sherret looked at her, and tugged nervously at his beard.

"Then I didn't dream that part of it. I thought you were a ghost. You were—"

He gripped her arm. It was as solid as his own.

"Yet now—" he began, but she clung suddenly to him, sobbing: "Sherry, don't ever leave me. Please. Stay with me. Believe in me. Stay with me."

Her intensity touched him. He put his arm about her and stroked her soft, bright hair. He wanted to reassure her with telling phrases. And all that came was tired cliché.

"Don't worry, darling. I love you. We'll always be together."

He meant it sincerely enough.

"But you said you had to go on—to Na-Abiza. You said I was the enchantress, Circe, holding you here . . ."

"I must have been out of my mind, delirious."

She looked up at him hopefully, with tear-wet eyes.

"Yes, you were ill," she said, eagerly. "You kept having nightmares about the Melas tree. You were painting a horrible picture in your mind. I helped to externalise it for you. If I choose, your imagination can work through mine to influence material things. Together, our minds can change the forms of anything, mould everything to our will. We are *artists*."

She emphasised the word, proudly.

"This house was built through the minds of men working in unison with mine," she said. "And the garden—"

"And you," Sherret broke in, astonished. "I remoulded you. I remember now."

"I desired only to please you," she murmured.

"You won't fade into a ghost again?"

She trembled slightly. "As long as you wish me here as I am, so long shall I be here."

"Your existence depends only on my wish?"

She was silent for a while, resting her head on his shoulder. Then, in a small, muffled voice: "Petrans do not believe in themselves. They exist only through the belief of others, others who have faith. That is why Petrans who try to live together merely die to nothing. Like the Melas trees, we can survive only through the minds of others."

He held her protectively. "Poor little Rosala," he said, automatically. His mind was spinning, trying yet again to fit itself into the mad frames of reference which was life on Amara. Only connect. Only adjust. Else the schizophrenia will return and the personality called Sherret will split into nameless, aimless dreamers, lost in a fog of amnesia.

He said: "I need you, Rosala, quite as much as you need me. We'll start a new life together."

## Chapter Five

The new life went on like a pleasantly exciting dream as the sky shaded from colour to colour.

So far the trek had taught Sherret one thing : to accept the incredible. That may or may not be a good doctrine. It could lead to a dulling of the sense of wonder. Excess of anything tends to boredom—even, strangely enough, excess of novelty.

There was plenty of novelty.

Just to watch Rosala paint involved a series of surprises. She needed no brush. She painted with her fingers.

She would lay a canvas on its back, pour quantities of colours on to it, and let them ooze sluggishly together. Then she would run her fingers lightly over the sticky mess, mixing, separating, blending, shaping with hair-line delicacy. It was as though each nerve-end at her finger-tips was working independently on its own contribution to the overall design.

Not a speck of paint adhered to her fingers.

Sherret questioned her about the nature of this strong and yet exquisitely controllable force which flowed from her. She couldn't enlighten him. All Petrans had this power at birth.

"Birth?" cut in Sherret. "I've been wondering about that. How do Petrans get to be born if they never cohabit?"

Rosala said, seriously : "There are some questions you mustn't ask, darling. We're a parasitic race and therefore vulnerable. To protect ourselves we're sworn to a code of secrecy about certain fundamental matters. I'll tell you this much : you and I could have children."

"Petrans?"

"You might as well ask 'Boys or girls?' We shouldn't know till they're born."

He fingered his beard. "Have you any children?"

"No, Sherry."

"Are you sworn not to reveal your age?"

"Bodily, I am as young or old as you wish me to be. Mental time is relative. Relatively, time is not the same on this planet as on Earth," she answered, evasively.

"Oh, for Pete's sake, I'm not trying to pry. Only to learn where I stand."

"You stand on your own feet, as you told Captain Maxton. Look darling, I think you'll have to get Reparism out of your system. It can never work on Amara. Inflexible things only get broken here."



Another row was in danger of brewing. He thought it best to keep quiet. But his silence became sullen.

Rosala's uncertain temper was simmering, too. She worked it off on a large block of something resembling granite. She attacked it with her bare hands, furiously pulling away chunks as though it were wax, indenting it with a finger-thrust, engraving it with a finger-nail. It began to take shape but, obviously, from her expression, the wrong shape.

Suddenly her temper boiled over. The whole massive block went hurtling to the far wall. The crash made the house shake. Hung paintings came toppling to the floor.

"Think I'll go for a stroll," said Sherret, with forced calm. Inwardly, he was shaking. In one of her blind rages, Rosala could as easily smash him against a wall.

After the house, the garden was a haven of peace in the subdued green daylight. Rosala never painted by the light of the Three Suns because they were never together in the sky. But in the house she drew their light together by some optical wizardry and fused them into the glaring white light she demanded for her work.

Sherret, chewing on a B-stick, roamed along the edge of the pool. Recently he'd noted that the diving plinth was subsiding. He planned a minor engineering job to remount the thing. When he mentioned it to Rosala, she laughed, lifted the weighty plinth with a finger, and re-arranged its foundations with little more than a wave of the hand.

He applauded, but inside there was an empty feeling. His project had collapsed, his general sense of purpose was weakened. He'd always thought of himself as good with his hands. Now they seemed like clumsy paws. He'd always been able to take care of himself in a scrap. Now a woman could twist him almost literally around her little finger.

He loved her, no doubt of it. But as long as he continued to live with her he would find it difficult to live with himself.

He reckoned he wasn't the only man who'd paced these garden walks feeling this way. He felt a certain sympathy for Lee . . .

He looked at the distant mountains and wondered how Lee had fared on his quest. There had been time to reach them and return. But Lee hadn't returned.

Suppose he did return, a conqueror? What then? Where would he, Sherret, fit in? Or would he? Rosala had never forsworn her love for Lee.

Unanswered, the question remained at the back of his mind. Even after he'd gone back indoors and found a Rosala all contrition and tenderness, and they'd become very close again.

But the clashes became more frequent. The lone walks became longer. And one purple day he found himself standing at the edge of the grove of Melas trees, daring himself like a schoolboy to dart in and out, just out of reach of their branches.

He began to understand why Lee had gone to prove himself.

Why wasn't it enough that Rosala was dependent on them for her existence? It should have given them a sense of mastery, but so far as he was concerned it didn't. Under Reparism, the man was the accepted master of the household. Under Reparism, a place for all persons, and all persons in their place.

Rosala just wouldn't stay put.

He felt he had to do something that she couldn't do better, if he was to live with her. But why should he? In Na-Abiza he could step back into his place in a Reparist system, and be respected for what he was.

He walked back to the garden and meditated by the pool. The statuary stood solidly around him, and there was more of it now. Some of it was of his own design, but fashioned through Rosala's power and therefore not wholly satisfying. Yet he knew that if he were to leave Rosala, the work which had emanated from his mind would endure. As had the work of Lee and other men.

But all which was solely of Rosala's design, including the house itself, would very gradually fade to nothing as the designer lost belief in her own existence.

Was Wilde right? Did each man have to kill the thing he loved?

Yet she might not necessarily cease to exist. Many men had come before him. More were likely to come after him and give her full life again.

But he knew—and now tried not to know—that there was a point of no return. If Rosala did fade to complete non-existence, then it would be as if she had never lived. And if all the men in her life came back here and called aloud for her, they would be crying for the moon.

She had told him that.

No, he couldn't risk doing that to her. And yet by remaining he was condemning himself to a partial death.

He slouched back to the studio.

She flung herself at him. "Sherry, dear ! Oh, what a fool I am !"

He held her tightly, and said : " Forget it, Rosala. But we can't go on like this, tearing ourselves to pieces. This is a kind of prison for both of us. Let's break through the walls and go on to Na-Abiza. Men like myself are active there, learning, discovering, planning—doing a job in life. Let's take our place beside them. Art is vital but it's not the whole of existence—not for me, anyhow."

She went very still in his arms. Then she said, quietly : " But I told you. Each Petran is born to his or her own area. We're not permitted to go outside it. It's part of the code, the law. There are reasons I can't tell you."

" Did you tell them to Lee ?"

" No. Nor to any man."

" Supposing Lee came back for you ?"

" I still couldn't go with him. He would have to remain here."

" What ? But what about me ?"

" I'm sorry, Sherry, but you would have to go. As I told you, I can live with only one man at a time. Lee was here before you. He would take precedence. It's the law."

" So both Lee and the law come before me," he said, grimly. " Well, that settles it. I shan't wait to be thrown out."

He thrust her aside and walked away.

" Sherry, Sherry, please, you can't . . ."

Over his shoulder he said brutally : " Don't worry. I'll find your precious Lee if it kills me, and send him back to you."

Although she hovered about him like a persistent fly, importuning, he ignored her while he gathered his belongings, chose some reasonable stout footwear and walked out into the garden for the last time. This time with shame, because he knew he had forced the quarrel and the issue.

He left her crying at the door, between the two naked effigies of herself. Lee had created those, through her. He realised now how much he had unconsciously resented it.

As he walked away from her, he was momentarily expecting a pulverising blow between the shoulder blades thrown at him in anger and despair. But it never came.

He resumed the trek to Na-Abiza, a free man. He knew that the path led to the north-west, through the mountain pass where Lee might be—and the Three-people were.

If Lee could face the Three-people, so could he. It was something Rosala had admitted she would not care to do.

He walked at a furious pace. Maybe this energy was generated by the feeling of sudden release. He tried to believe so. Maybe he was trying to put enough distance between Rosala and himself to weaken the temptation to return. He tried not to believe that.

But there wasn't much in the landscape to divert his attention. The distant foothills were darker than the mountains and appeared to be wooded. In between, however, stretched leagues of flat and mostly barren land.

Small chance of meeting anyone on the way. Rosala had explained why the river country was neither popular nor populous.

Under a cloudless, burning orange sky he marched until he was lurching with fatigue. He rested and resumed, and eventually reached the first slopes of the foothills when Red reigned supreme and all the world was drenched in a crimson sunset glow.

It made the woods look black and sinister indeed, and by now he had become wary of trees of any kind. He camped outside them and slept again. He awakened to see the high frosted peaks looking like pale green icebergs afloat on the smooth, greener ocean of the sky.

The sky-sea ran down into a V-shaped bay—the pass, and the gateway to Na-Abiza. He began to make his way up the slopes towards it. The woods closed about him. The trees were all unfamiliar types, hung with blossom, and in this cooler light looked not so much threatening as indifferent. He remained cautious of them, all the same.

The undergrowth was so thick in parts that he had to hack his way through with the machete.

Steadily, he climbed higher.

After several hours, he was tired. The climbing and hacking had made his muscles ache. There was a worse ache: a longing for Rosala. That, too, increased with time.

He was keeping an eye open for a likely clearing to camp in—for he wouldn't risk sleeping under any tree, however innocent-seeming—when he came across an odd phenomenon.

The first sign of it was a dead tree split neatly down the middle, the two halves leaning apart. He thought it had been struck by lightning, but so clean was the split that the tree might have been cut by a razor-edged axe. As if a giant had chopped a thirty-foot tree for firewood and then not troubled to collect it.

Then he discovered that several other trees had been sliced always cleanly though not always down the centre. Sometimes the trees had fallen clear apart. Sometimes only boughs had been lopped off. The ground was littered with branches of all sizes.

Some of the cuts were obviously old and new twigs were sprouting from the stumps. Others were comparatively recent. On some the running sap had scarce dried.

Sherret shook his head bewilderedly and continued the slow climb. A short way on he came to a wide clearing, open to the sky. His tired body decided this would be the camp-site. He spread his waterproof and tried to make himself comfortable. But it was chilly at this altitude. Moreover, a cold north wind was pouring steadily through the mountain pass and he couldn't escape it.

He got up, trudged back, returned with a load of the smaller chopped branches. He lit a fire, rigged the waterproof on a couple of branches to form a windscreen, and lay between it and the fire. Life became tolerable again.

After a meal he dozed, then fell into a deep sleep. His dreams were many and varied. The last of them became a nightmare.

He dreamed that a giant had actually chopped the trees and now was coming back for his firewood. A blood-drinking ogre from old, frightening nursery nights. All teeth and eyes and saliva, smashing through the woods with feet of steel, snapping off branches right and left, and crying, ridiculously :

*Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum.*

*For my wood I come.*

The ground shook under the approaching feet, and Sherret quivered with it, a terror-stricken child.

Thump. Thump. THUMP.

At the last and heaviest thump, Sherret started awake and looked around, wild-eyed. Beneath a tree at the very edge of the clearing a massive branch was rocking gently on the scanty grass. It had just fallen, and had been amputated neatly at a crotch.

He sat rigid, staring at it. It became as still as he. There was dead silence in the woods and nothing stirred. He must have slept long, for the light had changed and all was blue-washed.

He got cautiously to his feet, peering all round the clearing. It occurred to him now that he'd seen neither animal nor bird in the woods. Did they shun them because they were dangerous to life?

Was he merely imagining that danger was very close at this moment? Something behind the trees, watching him covertly?

But whatever had been slicing those trees about as though they were carrots must be too huge to conceal itself behind any tree.

Some invisible vandal, then, mutilating senselessly, pointlessly? But a thing of that size would surely have left tracks on the ground, even if it were itself invisible. He had noticed no tracks.

He stuck a B-stick between his teeth, gripped his machete, tip-toed nearer to the fallen branch. Beyond it, among the trees, he saw other newly severed branches, mostly large, recently fallen. His dreaming mind had interpreted the impacts of their landing as the thumps of approaching feet.

Perhaps there was no monster. Perhaps the trees were prey to some unimaginable disease which caused them to split apart suddenly in this peculiar manner.

But . . . this to happen to a number of individual trees almost simultaneously? The odds were considerably against it.

Common sense told him to waste no time in getting to hell out of this wood. He decided for once to be sensible. He went back to the still smouldering fire, gathered his things, shrugged on his rucksack. Machete in hand, he quitted the clearing on the far side, making for the pass.

He'd gone perhaps fifty yards when from close behind him came :

Thump. Thump. Thump.

And the swishing of leafy boughs and the crackle of breaking twigs.

He spun around.

A great invisible knife was stalking him, cutting its way steadily through the trees after him. The very evenness of its pace was unnerving. It threatened an inevitable end, as though

its unseen wielder were thinking : " Run if you like. Run till you drop. I shall catch up with you in my own good time."

It was literally blazing its trail with pieces of bark sliced off here and there, and more emphatically with trees wholly bisected or with major limbs lopped off. From these evidences it was clear that it was pursuing a relentlessly straight line, not deigning to deviate, slashing through every obstacle.

And it was aiming straight at Sherret.

He yelled and leaped aside. There was a rapid blur of movement and a row of saplings was uprooted and flung down. But *what* had moved ? It had been so lightning quick that in this dull blue light of the shadowed woods, he'd preceived no definite form.

And now it was quite invisible again. But it had ceased to advance—at least, there was no evidence of it advancing.

Sherret gulped, then turned and ran away from it.

Only to meet it advancing from the opposite direction. Monotonously the slices of tree-wood, heavy and light, were falling along its path.

Again he cried in fear, and turned to fly back.

To find himself facing its approach again . . . He stopped dead and looked wildly back over his shoulder.

There were *two* invisible knives, closing on him inexorably from opposite directions. It was as though he were caught between the blades of immense shears.

Panic had scattered his senses, but he had a blurred impression that somewhere a cry had sounded in response to his. Or was it only himself yelling again ?

With the desperation of a cornered rat he flung himself at the nearer threat, lashing violently with the machete at the seemingly empty air. Its edge jarred against the invisible knife-edge with a strange sound, as though he were hitting stone. The shock jolted it from his grasp. As it whirled off into the undergrowth, he glimpsed a split across the blade.

There was a rush of feet and a clang behind him.

As he began to turn, a powerful arm shoved him headlong into the bushes. Dazedly he scrambled a few yards on hands and knees, picked up his machete then stopped and looked back—at a fantastic sight.

Two enormous shapes, each as wide as a house and as tall as the tallest tree, curiously flat-looking and resembling a cross-section of a sponge, seemed to be trying to make physical contact.

Between them a man, wearing but a loin-cloth, was plainly trying to keep them apart. He carried only a thin shield, and kept buffeting the shapes alternately with it. He was built like a heavyweight boxer but had the agility of a featherweight.

Spinning rapidly this way, then that, he slammed hard with the shield. It rang like a gong at every blow.

Amazingly, the two shapes began to back slowly away from him and then to sink into the ground.

The big man came bounding towards Sherret.

"Get up, you fool!" he exclaimed, in Amaran. "Do you want to be sliced up for a meal? Follow me."

He leaped past, still carrying the shield. Sherret picked himself up and blundered after him. The man, smashing down the undergrowth with the shield, made his path easy.

## Chapter Six

All the same it was Sherret who first began to pant and groan for breath, after nearly a mile of hurrying across sloping ground and zig-zagging among trees.

"Wait for me," he gasped.

The man waited for him to catch up.

"Would you like me to carry you?" he asked, contemptuously.

Sherret drew whooping breaths, then panted: "All right, so you saved my life. Thanks for that. But I'll punch you right on the nose if you're going to take that sort of tone."

The man looked at him reflectively.

"Hold that for a moment," he said, suddenly, and proffered the thin shield. Sherret took it without thinking. The weight of it dragged him to the ground. The man laughed booming.

Sherret sat on the shield and wiped sweat from his face. Then he grinned. "We'd better postpone that fight. I don't think I can make the weight."

"You never will," said the other, now good-humoured. "Take your time. Have a rest. So long as you sit on the shield, you'll be safe."

"How d'you mean?"

"Those two Creedos are underground now. They may still be after us or they may not. But they could suddenly emerge here. It's a favourite trick of theirs to attack from below, when you can't see them coming. That way, they could finish me. But the shield would save you: they can't cut through it."



Sherret stared up at the big fellow, who didn't seem in the least worried by the situation. The said situation called for some explanation, but Sherret thought it hardly the moment to demand it. Further flight was imperative. Yet he hesitated a few seconds, studying the other man.

His face was as striking as his magnificent body. He was bearded too, but Sherret's beard was a limp wisp by comparison. This man's beard seemed jet black and thrust itself from his chin like a rock spur. His nose was equally forceful: he looked the most imperious of Caesars. Even his eyebrows suggested power, and the eyes themselves were like Rosala's in her angriest mood.

" . . . Nature might stand up,  
And say to all the world, ' This was a man.' "

Memories and comparisons jostled in Sherret's mind and gave him no comfort.

" What's your name ?" he asked, flatly.

" Lee-Gaunt-Lias-Nolla, to be precise. You may have heard of me."

" I have," said Sherret, feeling spiritless. He got to his feet, looking down at the shield.

Shakespeare, his idol, was ready with another comment:

" *The seven-fold shield of Ajax cannot keep  
The battery from my heart.*"

" We have affairs to discuss," he said, " in another part of the forest. Not here."

Lee picked up the shield easily with one hand.

" I have a place in mind," he said. " Come."

Sherret followed. He felt it would be his place always to follow this man. In a Reparist system Lee would hold office as a natural leader. And he would laugh Goffism to scorn.

Soon they came to a fair-sized stream gurgling down from the mountains. To Sherret's surprise, Lee walked into it and, knee-deep, began ploughing upstream. Sherret shrugged, and duly followed.

" No hurry now, and no danger," said Lee, carelessly. " The Creedos can drink only sparingly. Liquid in any quantity—especially fast-running water—tends to choke them. They dare not rise through this stream, which will lead us clear of the wood-belt."

It was a hard slog uphill against the current, but Sherret set his teeth and endured. At long last the woods thinned, and

they emerged on the bare upper slopes. A few minutes later Lee splashed his way to the bank. Sherret was glad to join him there. The pass was clearly visible now, directly ahead.

"My present home is just at the mouth there," said Lee, pointing. "A quite cosy cave. Do you think you can make it or would you prefer to rest first?"

"I can make it," said Sherret, grimly.

He did, but his legs were trembling with strain. Near drained of strength, he flung himself down inside, on a pile of brush. Even Lee seemed glad to rest now. He laid the shield between them and reclined at full length.

Presently, Sherret revived enough to examine the shield curiously.

"We have a metal rather like this on our planet," he said. "The molecules are gradually compressed by an artificial magnetic field. It takes years to prepare. We use it as a cutting tool to shear through the hardest materials. I didn't realise Amaran science was this far advanced."

"You're one of the Earthmen, aren't you?" said Lee, idly regarding the low-hanging roof. "I've heard about you. An effete species, by all accounts. You've some shocks coming your way on this planet, my friend. You landed on the barbaric side of Amara. You haven't contacted any real civilisation yet. Don't imagine you go unwatched. My people have long-range instruments. They could kill you Earthmen without stirring more than a finger, if they chose. But they're tolerant. The variety of life on Amara teaches one to be tolerant. They won't harm you if you don't do anything foolish."

"Such as?"

"Trying to force your way of life on them for instance. Accept a hint, friend. Confine your attention to the barbarians."

"To the Three-people, say?"

Lee went still. "Keep away from them . . . if you want to live."

"We're very near to them here, aren't we?"

"We are. You can see them from here."

"Beware of those who have only two, of those who become three—"

"Of that which becomes many," Lee finished for him. "Well, at least you've learned to beware of those who have only two."

"Only two what?"

"Only two dimensions. The creedos. Strictly speaking, it's not true. They have three dimensions. But their thickness is almost negligible. When they present themselves edge on—and they always try to—in a poorish light you just can't see them. But they can see you. They have hundreds of tiny eyes all over their body—some along the edges. Hundreds of mouths, too. They live on the juices of vegetation, but they're partial also to a drop of animal blood, if they can find it, which isn't often."

Sherret shuddered.

"You mean they slice through you, sucking in blood as they pass?"

"Yes. Just as they absorb the sap of trees or the juice in roots. They spend most of their time browsing on roots just below ground. But sometimes they surface in patches of rich vegetation, particularly forests. Variety in diet is a good thing, you know."

"But confound it, Lee, their internal organs must be too narrow to allow moisture to flow."

"It can be pumped, man, by muscular action. Anyhow, they have nothing elaborate in the way of internal organs—nor of brains, either. They're as uncomplicated as a sponge. It's merely that Nature has compressed the organic matter of their bodies much in the way the inorganic matter of this shield has been compressed. It doesn't lessen their great weight and it increases their rigidity. It makes them one enormous and extremely sharp cutting edge. Of course, they're vulnerable at the sides, to modern weapons. If you can get at their sides."

"I don't understand how they manoeuvre," Sherret said.

"Neither do I, Earthman. As a boy I assumed that it was just a matter of balance. It is, too, but it involves the lines of force in the gravitational field of the Three Suns. Now that is complicated—too much so for me."

"H'm, they're really quite a Doodle," said Sherret. "Comparable with the Melas tree."

"Oh, so you already know about that which become many."

"Yes. We've met. I've yet to make the acquaintance of those who become three. Have you met them yet?"

It was a leading question and he tried to make it sound casual.

Lee made no answer. He brooded. Presently, he said "Perhaps I should never have met *you*, Earthman. I could have avoided it. Looking down from here, I saw the smoke of your fire. I wondered what kind of fool would camp in the woods where the Creedos roam. I came to try to save you from your own ignorance or stupidity. Perhaps I should have left you to them."

"Why? Because I ask awkward questions? I'm sorry. I'll shut up."

Lee looked at him curiously. He asked: "You were coming from the south?"

"Roughly, yes. I'm on my way to Na-Abiza. If you're wondering whether I happened to come across Rosala, I can tell you I did. She also saved my life. And I lived with her. And left her. I know why you came here, because I guess I've come for pretty much the same reason. Also to persuade you to go back to Rosala. She loves you and needs you."

"Oh-ho. Well, that's frank enough. Do you still love her?"

"I'm afraid so."

"So do I, Earthman. But I can't go back to her yet. Not until I've faced the Three-people. I've been skulking like a coward in this cave for longer than I care to remember, trying to pluck up enough courage to walk through the pass."

"I can hardly believe it, Lee. I may be a coward but you're not. Damn it, you took on both those Creedos to save the life of a complete stranger."

Lee smiled bitterly, and said: "Perhaps I was hoping they'd kill me, Earthman. Of late I've been depressed enough to think of killing myself. I haven't the courage either to face the Three-people or go back and face Rosala and admit I'm a coward. The Creedos? They're nothing much. They're not cruel or malicious—only greedy and brainless. I've known about them since I was a child. It's the things you don't know about—except that they're evil and they exist—that frighten you. This shield wouldn't protect me against the Three-people. It didn't protect my father."

Sherret looked at him questioningly.

"Yes," said Lee. "It's my father's shield. He brought it to this same pass, perhaps to this very cave. And then he brought it back home with him. He had been a brave, strong man. Perhaps a bit of an exhibitionist, but he had humour and he

was kind. He came home, dragging this useless shield, broken in spirit, wrecked in mind. I think he had been frightened nearly to death. He did die soon afterwards—of melancholia, the doctors said."

"Then there's good reason for you to feel frightened," said Sherret.

"Admittedly. But I shan't know peace of mind until I've faced what he faced. And, if possible, destroy it."

"You said your people can observe this side of the world and destroy its inhabitants without bothering to come here. Then why haven't they destroyed the Three-people?"

Lee said: "Because the Three-people have never stirred from this valley and have never harmed anyone except those who intrude on them. My people believe in tolerance to perhaps too great a degree, and think people like my father were wrong to intrude. Also, we can't observe the Three-people by our instruments. This valley appears always to be in darkness on our screens. It may be only a local natural phenomenon. Or it may be an intentional jamming of reception—I don't know."

"None of this lessens the truth that you're as brave as your father, Lee, for that's what you're really seeking to prove. Braver, for you know what could happen to you."

"So did he, Earthman. It had happened to his friends. My people have become decadent through too much ease. They talk their way out of making the smallest decisions. They have lost all initiative. I'm contaminated by the racial weakness—else I shouldn't still be lingering in this cave. But one or two of them, like my father, were different. Adventurous. And they journeyed through the barbaric lands, exploring. Unless more characters like them arise, and soon, the day of our race will be done."

"I get what you mean. Listen, Lee, I'd like to make a proposition. I must go through this pass to Na-Abiza. I should be glad to have your company—in the pass, I mean. We'll meet the Three-people together. If we survive, then you'll return to Rosala and I'll go on to Na-Abiza."

Lee considered, then said: "Pride tells me to face this thing alone. Instinct tells me that to do so means destruction. Wisdom tells me that to have a friend at my side may mean success."

"Let us be friends, then," said Sherret, extending a hand.

Lee took it. "Until the slow burn eats its tail."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, figuratively, until the end of the world. Perhaps actually so, too—we don't really know. The slow burn is some sort of fire eating its way gradually around the globe. Like an ulcer. It travels hardly faster than a glacier but never ceases to progress—in a mathematically straight line. It started in the barbarian lands and so far remains there—in fact, I believe it passes through this very mountain range. My lackadaisical race will refuse to worry about it until it reaches their hemisphere. If then. They haven't investigated it very thoroughly. It may be only a surface phenomenon. On the other hand, it may run very deep and actually be severing the planet—though I doubt it. But some barbarians believe that when at last it encircles the globe and meets itself and begins to 'eat its tail,' then Amara will fall apart in two halves. Like a cut fruit. Which reminds me—are you hungry?"

"A little. It would be a good idea to get food under our belts before we start. A full belly increases confidence."

"You're right. I have a good larder here . . ."

## Chapter Seven

While Lee prepared a meal, Sherret stood at the cave-mouth, looking down the pass. In the far distance, between the feet of the steep mountain slopes, there was a small settlement of some kind. Houses or huts—he couldn't discern details: the blue light was deepening and visibility was poor.

For some time he watched. Lee joined him, and said: "In brighter light you can see them walking about. They look human enough, and there seems to be very few of them. Yet I find after I've been watching them for some time I begin to shake with dread, and can't look any more."

"Think I feel the shakes coming on myself," said Sherret, and turned back into the cave. "Let's eat."

Over the meal, they talked. Rosala soon came under discussion.

"She's a handful that can become more than a handful," Lee commented. "But, by heavens, she can love!"

Sherret agreed, but when Lee began to go into details became disturbed and tried to change the subject. This one was too

painful to dwell on. He managed to swing the conversation round to morals, society, and Goffism and Reparism.

Lee dismissed Goffism as lunacy and Reparism as stifling.

"But," Sherret objected, "under Reparism you know where you stand and everyone recognises your right to stand there. I don't say there's not the odd case of nepotism, but by and large promotion depends upon fair examinations, merit, length of service, credits awarded for courage, and so forth. Not upon chance or crooked schemes or intrigue or family connections. Your self-respect, and the respect of others, depends on what you've achieved. You know what you can become. So you have a goal in life, a purpose—"

"Horrible !" Lee exclaimed. "Unnatural. Life isn't like that."

"No. But it ought to be," Sherret said, heatedly. "Nature is merely doodling about pointlessly. Man must provide it with an intelligent working plan, a design with significance."

"Damn you, Earthman, I don't *like* your plan. I don't want it imposed on me. I will not be regimented. You think you're arguing from reason. You're not. You're arguing emotionally. Fundamentally, you're an insecure personality. You need this system to buttress you because you're afraid to stand alone."

That took something of the wind out of Sherret's sails.

He thought about it, tugging at his beard. "You could be right to some extent," he admitted, eventually.

"Politics are dangerous," said Lee. "Let us go now—while we're still friends."

They looked at each other seriously for a moment. It was a small moment of truth. The vital one was nearing and couldn't be dodged any more.

"I'm ready," said Sherret.

They walked along the valley together. It had become the purple time again, and the place looked gloomy. Sherret wished the phrase "The Valley of the Shadow of Death," wouldn't keep crossing his mind.

He said : "I don't like the violet hour. Everything bad seems to happen to me then."

"I rather like it," said Lee. "It creates a mood of mystery and poetry. See—the lights are on in the village."

The little houses in the distance had lighted windows.

The two men walked on in preoccupied silence. The mountain walls on either side had become topless in the purple obscurity. Lee was weaponless, but carried the shield, although he knew it was probably useless.

They reached the outskirts of the village. There was no-one in the single street. To Sherret it seemed very much like a village you could find in plenty in the southern Highlands of Scotland. Some neat two-storeyed houses, some bungalows, and cottage shacks. All were detached. Each had its small cultivated garden. There were trees planted at regular intervals to form an avenue.

It was very quiet, but so were Scottish villages. Lights glowed behind window curtains, but some houses were dark and seemed empty.

It could be an autumn evening in the Trossachs. It seemed harmless enough.

Nevertheless, Sherret found himself fingering the handle of the machete on his belt.

Lee noticed. "Getting edgy?"

Sherret nodded. "I'm scared sick."

"So am I. It's all just too innocent, isn't it? I'm glad we came together."

They reached the end of the street without seeing a movement of any kind. The quiet seemed to have become an unnatural silence. They could hear the sound of their own breathing.

They turned and looked back along the empty street.

Sherret felt like suggesting that this was enough, honour was satisfied, they could leave with dignity. But he knew it wasn't enough.

"Let us pay a social call," said Lee. "Which house do you think looks the most hospitable?"

Sherret's secret shame bred an over-compensating boldness.

"That one," he said, pointing to the largest. It was double-fronted, on two floors.

They negotiated a front gate and a short path to the door. It was a completely bare door. Deliberately, Lee thumped on it thrice with his great fist.

They waited.

They heard faint sounds of movement in the house but no-one came to the door.

Lee banged again, and shouted: "Wake up in there!"

No answer.



"We're not welcome here," said Sherret, finally. "Let's try another house."

"I've an idea we shan't be welcome at any of them," said Lee, beginning to get angry. "And no wonder. Damned pack of murderers!"

He lost patience and rammed a heavy shoulder against the door. Its bolts burst and it flew open, revealing a lighted hall.

"We'll root them out," Lee snapped. "Come on."

Sherret followed him along the hall. They opened doors into two empty rooms, and then in the third and largest they found one of the Three-people.

He was sitting quietly in a deep, hide-covered chair, and looked up as they burst in. The furniture was of good quality and looked to be hand-made. Murals of mountain scenery covered the walls and the skins of unknown animals the floor. A white spiral of light glowed in the ceiling.

It seemed reasonably normal and civilised.

So did the occupant, who wore an elaborately embroidered jacket and comfortable, fur-topped high boots. He was a frail, oldish man with grey-white hair and a mild, kind face.

He regarded them benevolently.

"It was kind of you to call," he said, in a pleasantly deep voice. "But would you mind leaving now? You may know of our bad reputation. Believe me, it's well-founded. You are in mortal danger in this village. Leave the valley while you can. Waste no time."

"I'm sure your warning is well-meant," said Lee, closing the door but watching the man in the chair warily. "However, we've not come with the intention of wasting time. I want to know what happened to various visitors here from my country. Most particularly, what happened to my father."

"If your father is not buried in the cemetery just outside the village, then he managed to get away."

"He got away," said Lee, savagely, "but at some expense."

"Friend you are dangerously angry and vindictive. I implore you to go."

Lee leaned his shield against the wall, strode over and grabbed a handful of the fancy jacket. He lifted the man by it, and growled in his face: "I don't want advice. I want information. Are you going to talk or must I apply pressure?"

"How can he talk when you're choking him with his collar?" asked Sherret. "Put him down."

Slowly, reluctantly, Lee let the man fall back in his chair.

"Are we alone in this house?" he demanded.

Purple-faced, the man tried to answer but had not recovered enough breath.

"Earthman, take a look round the house," snapped Lee. "I'll watch this specimen."

Sherret nodded, slipped his rucksack off for freer movement, and started for the door. He paused because the Three-man began making choking noises, attempting speech, and had raised his hand in an imploring gesture.

"He doesn't want you to search the house," said Lee. "So he's hiding something. Go and find what it is. But be careful."

Sherret nodded again, more reluctantly this time. He unhooked his machete and stepped into the hall. He was glad Lee couldn't see the way his hands were beginning to shake.

He knew that the other rooms on this floor were unoccupied, and ignored them. With a sinking feeling in his stomach he climbed the stairs slowly. The lights were on upstairs, which was some relief. He preferred light to dark.

But then he had second thoughts about that. Maybe that meant that there *were* people upstairs. Maybe the old man downstairs wasn't a real Three-man, and the genuine articles were lying in wait up here.

He stood on the landing looking along a corridor of doors. A strip of light gleamed under everyone, and there were six of them. His lips became dry and he licked them. This was like one of the old nursery nightmares. The one that centred on something hiding behind the door . . .

Which door? And what was the something?

He braced himself and kicked open the nearest door.

There was no reaction. So far as he could see, the room was deserted. But behind the door . . .?

He made a grand leap into the room, and whirled around, machete poised. But there was nothing behind the door. Although the light was on, this room didn't appear to be in use. Some odd pieces of furniture, some paintings and general bric-a-brac were piled against one wall. That was all.

He visited each room in turn. First the screwing up of courage, the kick, the leap, and the anti-climax of an empty room. Only two of the rooms showed any signs of being lived

in. One was a bedroom. The other—the last and largest room—was a studio-cum-workshop. There was a workbench littered with tools and wood-shavings. There was an easel and a little table bearing a trayful of paints. There were a number of canvases stacked on shelves.

He wandered round, picking up pieces of carved wood curiously. They looked to be the parts of an ornamental display case.

Then, shaking him to the core, a scream of awful terror came from the ground floor, swelled up the stairs, echoed along the upper corridor. It didn't sound like a man's voice. But he knew it was—and it was Lee's.

A richly carved strip fell from Sherret's hand. It rattled loudly on the wooden floor in the silent aftermath of that scream.

He ran downstairs, brandishing the machete, hearing strange, gasping sobs as he reached the hall. He flew into the room where he had left Lee.

The big man was lying huddled in a corner, sobbing, arms crossed in front of his face, as if he were trying to ward off some murderous attacker. But the only other creature in the room was the Three-man, slumped in his chair, his face turned away from Lee and expressing infinite sadness.

"Lee, Lee, what is it?"

Sherret dropped on one knee beside Lee and gently forced his arms apart. Lee's face was contorted with horror, and his eyes were bulging glassily. It reminded Sherret of Rosala's painting of himself in the grip of the Melas tree.

Then he dropped Lee's arms and started back with a cry. For one side of Lee's throat had been torn out and the blood was pumping out in spurts.

"Oh, God."

Sherret beat his hands together. He didn't know what to do. Nothing could staunch that flow.

He blundered across to the Three-man.

"You! Did you do that?"

"Partly. Not entirely," said the man, in a low, tired voice.

"I'll attend to you later," Sherret said between his teeth.

"Is there a doctor in this damned village, anyone who can help?"

"No-one can come here. No-one can help. Your friend is dying."

With a moan, Sherret rushed back to Lee. The blood was a rapidly spreading pool. He knelt in it regardlessly.

"Lee!"

Lee's face was deathly white but much calmer. His eyes were still glassy but now half-closed. A hint of recognition showed in them.

"It's gone," he whispered, thickly. "Go, Earthman, before . . . it returns . . . Go to Rosala . . . Give her my love."

The voice became a faint, bubbling sound.

There was a final, choked whisper: "Earthman . . . I never knew your name."

Then he died.

Although he had known him but briefly, this was the only real friend among men whom Sherret had made since he left Earth. He felt desolated. Gently, he closed Lee's eyes. Then he tried to control himself.

He went over to the Three-man.

"Now, explain this," he said, keeping himself in check.

"Do as your friend told you. Go now, quickly. I shall see that he is decently buried."

"I shall not leave this house until you tell me—"

"All right, but you take a terrible risk. Listen, and don't question, then go."

Then the Three-man went on, earnestly and urgently:

"There's a curse on my kind. Some split in the psyche—no time now to theorise. The evil side of our nature has split away from us. It exists independently, a disembodied entity. But whenever two of us meet, after a short while the two evil entities fuse and form a third being.

"This third being is real and material in relation to the people from whom it has sprung. It is concentrated evil, the murderer in all of us. It will attack that one of us whose baser emotions form the greater part of it.

"Your friend was full of hate and revenge at that time . . . it helped to kill him. He tried to escape but the entity cornered him.

"You didn't see it. You couldn't: it wasn't part of you. The amalgam dissolved when you came. This sometimes happens when another person joins the group very suddenly and disturbs the balance of forces. But not often. The more there are in a group, the more powerful the entity becomes.

"We infect others. Therefore we have put ourselves in isolation. My kind are doomed to live and die alone. Each in his own house, tending his own garden, trying to make some kind of bearable life for himself. Painting. Writing. Handicrafts. I like making my own furniture.

"But no two of us dare linger together for more than a few . . . Oh ! . . . Go. Please go. I have talked too long."

Sherret turned to go, but something was forming itself rapidly between him and the door.

"Too late !" cried the Three-man in despair, and turned his face away.

Fear swept through Sherret like a cold wind. He tried to outflank the darkening, cloudy shape and reach the door. And then all at once it leaped into sharp focus like a stereoscopic moving picture.

But it was no recorded shadow. It was here, now, real as himself, and pulsing with life and purpose.

There were traces of the Three-man in it, but predominantly it was a nightmare version of himself. Every feature was enlarged and distorted as though from some virulent glandular disease. The body was taller and bulkier and yet somehow misshapen.

The thing was mad and blind and had no control whatever over its actions—somehow he knew that. It had neither sense nor pity. It was just an embodied destructive urge.

There could be no appeal and no defence.

The staring, sightless eyes burned red. The mouth hung open like a dead man's. The teeth were huge and there were spots of blood on them. The hands were grotesquely twisted and the fingers were spreading like claws preparing to reach and rip.

It knew its victim was near and it was seeking a way to it. There was a frightening eagerness about its concentration.

Then suddenly the eyes of red fury glared straight into Sherret's eyes. His mind swam. Blurrily, he became a three-fold personality. He was the drained-out Three-man in the chair, keeping his head turned away, trying to see nothing, abysmally unhappy, lonely, despairing. He was his fear-stricken, petrified self. And also he was—it.

And it was just an insensate repetition of an hysterical scream : *Kill ! Kill ! Kill !*

Then the manifold viewpoint coalesced to just the one—that of the hunted.

The thing had located him and was moving to the attack.

Sherret reeled back against the wall. He was screaming hysterically himself now, but soundlessly, as though in a vacuum.

Frantically grasping for some kind of safety, he clawed the wall—and encountered Lee's shield, leaning there. He squirmed himself behind it, with the pitiful desperation of the hunted scrambling for sanctuary, however inadequate.

He found himself crouching over his rucksack on the floor. Fear-sharpened memory unearthed a wild hope. He scrabbled inside and found the light-weight grenades and worked one free from its band. His thumb-nail tore off the capsule's nipple. Then he flung the grenade awkwardly, numbing his fore-arm against the shield's hard edge.

The explosion wasn't so much a sound as a sudden and agonising increase of pressure against his eardrums. The blast-driven shield rammed him hard against the wall.

Then the pressure dropped. The shield fell away, clanged on the floor. It had played its part: not a single splinter had penetrated it.

But it was a long time before the demoralised Sherret took his hands from his face and saw what there was to see. The air was still thick with bitter smoke. The entity had vanished. The murals were full of ragged holes and cracks, and half the furniture was so much smashed wood.

The little Three-man still sat in his big hide chair, and looked somehow even smaller. Several plastoid splinters were embedded in different parts of the chair. At least one of them had passed through his heart.

## Chapter Eight

Sherret never did remember leaving the house or the valley.

The next thing he became aware of was the dirt-grimed face of a savage with two wild-looking eyes staring at him from a tangle of red hair.

Slowly it dawned on him that the face was looking *up* at him, from a pool of still water.

He washed the grime from it in that same water, plastered down the shock of hair, combed the beard with his fingers. He noticed that his hands were rather thin. He felt a little better but still very tired, hungry, and confused.

He squatted by the pool, looking around. The first thing that struck him was the peculiarity of the light. The sky was a rich yellow, and yet he was seeing things in fairly natural colours. He shifted to look behind him, and had to shield his eyes from the glare of what seemed to be a white-hot cable stretched tautly along the ground some distance away.

It either began or ended at a point maybe a hundred yards from him, and ran off across flat grassland for as far as the eye could follow. In that direction the horizon bore what seemed to be a long, low ridge, until Sherret recognised the V-shaped nick in it.

Then memories came back like a rushing multitude. With them, the pain of the realisation of a two-fold loss.

But there were no memories of what had happened since, crazy with fear, he looked upon a shattered room and two dead men.

His witless wandering had brought him to this lozenge-shaped natural pool in a waste of green grass. He stood up and made a more careful survey of the area.

In the opposite direction from the far-away mountain range there was what appeared to be another ridge. But this really was only a ridge, and although it made a sky-line it was actually quite near. The grass carpet rolled up and over it. His gaze wandered along its crest, then focussed on what appeared to be a small conical cairn heaped there. His eyes watered as he forced them to gather detail.

He realised that it was no cairn, but part of something standing beyond the ridge.

He was staring at the dull nose of a rocket-ship—and it could only be the *Pegasus*.

For all his anxious calculation, he had arrived at Na-Abiza at last without knowing it.

This discovery gave him a spurt of energy, enough to make a short detour to look more closely at the line of white effulgence. Not too closely : its brightness pained the eyes, and besides, he suspected radio-activity.

So this was the "slow burn." It seemed to be a channel of liquid fire, hardly more than a couple of inches wide. The eye could detect no progress. All the same, the burn was progressing, he knew, towards the grassy ridge.

With a little shock, he saw that the *Pegasus* lay directly in its line of march. This was a chance in millions, but he had

learned that the outside chance had a way of happening on Amara.

He set off towards the ship. Before he had gone far he noticed for the first time that the worn rucksack and machete were no longer in evidence. He guessed he had left them back there in that room of horror.

He climbed to the top of the ridge—the effort sapped much of his small bonus of energy. He saw now that the ridge had concealed more than the bulk of the *Pegasus*. There was an irregular cluster of wattle-and-daub huts, the crudest he'd seen on Amara. Among them, a few natives strolled about—they were tall, well-built, and as yellow as the sunlight in which they walked.

He was surprised to note that the base of the *Pegasus* was totally enclosed by a high fence, also of sticks and clay. None of the crew was visible.

This was his goal. Alone on his raft, he had longed to get here. Yet now he felt indifferent. He walked down towards the ship, desiring food more than human company.

The natives noticed him. They gathered in a knot, whispering excitedly. By now, he guessed, they knew the crew by sight individually. So he was the new Earthman who had arrived somehow without a ship.

As he neared, the whole crowd of them sank to their knees and bowed their heads to him.

He acknowledged the salutation with weary amusement. "Well, thanks, folks. But no autographs today."

They remained silent, bowed, reverent.

There was a gate in the fence around the ship. He pushed through.

At the bottom of the ship's ladder, Captain Bagshaw was sunning himself in a sagging canvas chair. He wore only bathing trunks, which had stretched and split. On his left was a large pile of fruit, loaves, and native dishes. On his right, within reach, a swollen wineskin lay in the shade of a broad-leaved potted plant.

Sherret stopped short at the sight of him.

Bagshaw seemed equally surprised at the sight of Sherret.

"Who the devil are you?"

Sherret gave a salute which the Captain ignored.

"Lieutenant Sherret, sir, of the *Endeavour*."



"Alex Sherret? Good heavens, so it is. All that facial fungus fooled me. You've lost a bit of weight, too. Come and sit down, boy. Have a drink."

"I'd rather have something to eat, sir."

"Help yourself from that heap. All fresh—today's offerings."

Bagshaw became all fat buttocks as he reached behind his chair for another which lay there folded. He dragged it back with a grunt, tried to erect it, failed to get the rods in the slots, and let it fall in shapeless disorder.

"Damn the thing," he said, and abandoned it.

This flushed, careless drunk, all sweaty paunch and flabby limbs, was Captain Robert Bagshaw, one-time Number One Cadet of the Space Academy, champion middle-weight boxer of the Space Corps, Fifth Division, renowned disciplinarian, chess master—and total abstainer.

Which was as Sherret remembered him.

"Have a drink, Alex," Bagshaw said again.

Sherret had a mouth full of new bread, but he said, muffledly; "Thanks, I will. I need one."

"Don't we all?" said the Captain, heaving the wineskin on to his enormous thighs. He poured two large glasses of red liquid.

"Heart's blood, we call it," he said. "Native brew. Potent. It'll be the death of me. Cheers."

Sherret watched him over the rim of his glass.

"Is the ship—" he began, and choked as a fireball seemed to explode in his gullet.

Captain Bagshaw guffawed. "You get used to that delayed action, in time."

When Sherret could speak, he tried again: "Is the ship still run under Reparism?"

"Good lord, no. Reparism is passe—dонтcher know?"

There was a trace of bitterness in Bagshaw's tone. He took another gulp of the brew.

"Goffism is the bright new hope of Earth," he went on. "Don't believe in it myself. Don't believe in anything much any more."

"You don't have Goffism here, then?"

"We do not. We don't have any Kings for a Day kicking us around. We all do as we damn well please."

"But—"

"Look, son, we've had it. The dream days of Reparism are over for us. Oh, it'll come back—after we're dead. That won't do us much good. And I've no family, so what does it matter? I used to sit here waiting for notification from H.Q. that I'd been given an award for the success of this expedition. I lived for those gongs and ribbons, y'know, the eternal boy scout. I hoped they'd make me a Colonel. But the Goffists—they don't even bother to answer our messages. What does the latest jack-in-office care about us? They're too busy with their private vendettas. Look at what happened to that poor old fool, Maxton . . ."

"What, sir?"

"Don't 'sir' me, Alex. I'm Bob to you. Maxton? Oh, they hung him. Chief Engineer's orders—what's his name?—Mackay. He was sorry afterwards. The Scots get murderous in drink, y'know. They were all blind drunk. Must be a foul brew in those parts. This stuff isn't like that. It makes you feel good, benevolent and all that. We *Pegasus* chaps get on fine together here. The natives worry me, though. Fine-looking lot, comely wenches—you saw them?"

Sherret started. He was thinking about Captain Maxton and his own shipmates, and their fate.

"Yes, I saw them sir. They seemed to imagine I was a little tin god."

Bagshaw shook his head and tapped the ship's ladder.

"This is the little tin god: the *Pegasus*. At least, it's supposed to be the temple of the god. And we're the priests of the god, to be respected as such. That's what the natives made up out of their own heads when we arrived, and at the time we saw no reason to disillusion them. For they're a tough crowd. They'd kill you as soon as look at you if you hadn't got some sort of hold over them. I was a fool. I took the easy, ready-made way—not like me in those days, y'know. And, naturally, now it'll backfire on me—on us."

"How?"

"You've seen the slow burn, as they call it?"

"Yes. It's heading right for the ship," said Sherret, starting another loaf.

"I know. Heading for the village, too. When *Pegasus* landed plumb in its path, the natives assumed a god had descended from Olympus or thereabouts to cry: 'Halt! You shall not pass. I have come to save Na-Abiza.' Egotistical lot!"

But it'll pass through *Pegasus* like a super blow-torch. In anything from ten to fifteen years, I reckon. Doubt if I'll be here then—Heart's Blood will have taken care of me. But how better to pass the time than in wassail? The men like the women here, too—most of 'em have gone native to some extent. Hang the women, I say. For me—the grape."

"But, sir—Bob—why don't you get to hell out of it before the showdown? Amara is plenty big enough to get lost in."

"Lost? I'm already lost, Alex. Still, I did plan to get out, long ago. But I'd already lost authority through accepting this priesthood pantomime. The men became too happy here. Never been made such a fuss of in their lives. Not a man would come with me. Not one. If I could have had just one of them at my side . . . Pity you weren't in my bunch, Alex. You'd have come with me."

"Sure I would, Bob."

Bagshaw sighed. "It means everything to have someone you can rely on."

Sherret thought: You're too right.

Aloud, he said: "It's not too late. Come with me now."

Bagshaw shook his head. "Too out of condition. Amara's a tough place. I hate it. I've been out there. You can't count on anything. You never know what's going to hit you next, but it'll be unexpected and unpleasant. An unpredictable world. I'm a product of Reparism. There's no place for me on this lunatic planet. But if you *can* take it, believe me, you're a man . . . Got a B-stick on you? No, I suppose not. Run out of 'em long since. Know what? Wish we hadn't run right out of fuel when we landed. Wish we had something left in the drive-box, just enough to blast *Pegasus* right out of here—and I wouldn't care a damn where we crashed. End with a bang, not a whimper. Where's your glass?"

"Thanks, I've had enough. Enough of everything. I'm moving on now, Bob."

"But you haven't met any of the boys. Digger, Fritz, and Doc Lamont—you know them. Doc's up in the ship. The others are with their lady-loves in the village. They'd be glad to see you."

"Another time, maybe," said Sherret. But he knew there would never be another time. "Good-bye, Captain." He grasped Bagshaw's hand and shook it.

"I'm sorry you're not staying, Alex. Yet, in another way, glad. You may make out. The rest of us have made a mess of it."

He insisted that Sherret take a big plastic bag full of food from the heap of offerings, and a full wineskin. He saw him off at the gate, and the natives made obeisance to both of them. Bagshaw indicated them with good-humoured contempt.

"If they could read our minds, within an hour we'd be fattening all the region kites. Especially me." He thumped his paunch.

Sherret climbed up and over the ridge, and never turned his head to look back. There was nothing to look back on. Na-Abiza—the Na-Abiza of his imagination—just wasn't there.

He recalled a conversation with a Paddy at the outset of the trek, which seemed pure nonsense at the time.

"Have you ever been to Na-Abiza?"

"Yes, I have, human, but I didn't get there."

"Why not?"

"Because it wasn't there when I got there."

"But you just said you didn't get there."

"Of course I didn't, human, if it wasn't there."

"Well, is it there now?"

"How can I tell? I'm here, not there."

Yes, he would always be here, and never there. The paradox was that a man just wasn't here if he weren't trying to get there. You had "to shine in use, or rust in monumental mockery." He seemed to have learned the hard way what Stevenson had proclaimed long ago, that to travel hopefully was a better thing than to arrive.

He set his sights on the next goal, the V-shaped notch in the distant mountains. Once, he had thought of it as the gateway to Na-Abiza. Well, it still could be.

Without Rosala, for him there could be no Na-Abiza.

He was well into the pass, almost back to the village. He was sad but not afraid. The villagers, isolated in their separate cells, wished only to be left alone.

Then he saw the cemetery, just off the road. He had stumbled past it mindlessly before. It was well tended and there were two new graves, heaped with fresh earth, with carved wooden boards at the head of each.

He picked his way through other graves to them.

The inscriptions, not long completed by an unknown villager, said baldly on the one board :

LAURAL CANATO

And even more baldly on the other :

UNKNOWN

There were several other nameless boards around, too, but they were old and weathered. This could only be Lee's.

He stood for a long time looking down at it, remembering. But for the accidental death of this Laural Canato, almost certainly the old man in the chair, he himself might well be filling a nameless grave here.

Just behind him, someone stepped on a twig and snapped it. He started and spun around, afraid of beholding he knew not whom—or what.

It was Rosala, in a travel-stained tunic but as lovely as ever, regarding him between tears and laughter. She held out her arms to him.

Almost stunned by surprise, he went to her. They embraced with passion.

After a few moments, a doubt struck him. He held her a little apart.

He asked : " Were you looking for me—or for Lee ?" And added, a trifle sourly : " As it happens, you've found both of us."

" Both ? What do you mean ?"

He had to explain. She knelt over the grave and cried freely. He watched with mixed feelings.

Then, quite abruptly, she stood up, dried her eyes, and said : " Let us get away from this terrible place."

" And go where ?"

" Wherever you want to go, darling."

He thought about that as they walked back to the road. On its verge, he stopped and said : " You said that Petrans were forbidden to leave their appointed area. Yet you are here—very much here. I don't understand."

" I broke the law. I walked out of my area. I didn't wish to go on living in that way any longer. Not after you left me. I came to find you."

" Not Lee ?"

" When Lee left me, I remained there, didn't I ? I didn't walk out for him. But I did for you, Sherry."

He kissed her.

"Well, now we can go back," he said.

"There's no going back once the law has been broken. Anyway, I don't want to. I'm happier the way I am."

"But your pictures, and all your—"

"You said art wasn't the whole of existence. I've found that's true. I want you. I can learn to paint and sculp again later, in a more deeply satisfying way. It came too easily before."

"Sorry, my dear, but I don't get your meaning."

"I can tell you now—now that I'm outside the law, I mean—that a renegade Petran loses the ability to tap the Power. When he quits his area, the connection breaks."

"And you renounced that—for me?"

"When it came to it, there was no choice. I couldn't live without you. In any case, I haven't lost anything : I've gained. My body is my own—you can't change me now. I exist in my own right, and believe in my own existence. I'll live and die like any normal humanoid. You see, it was a sort of paradox. If you were content to let the Power act through you, then you had no faith in your own power to act independently. Or even to exist independently. If you renounce the Power, then you gain faith in yourself. Perhaps I'm the first Petran to learn this."

"Perhaps the first of many, Rosala. Why not go on a mission to enlighten your fellow Petrans ? If they're at all like you, they may choose freedom, too. It would give us the hope of one worthy stock coming into being on this planet. Frankly, I see little other hope. With a very few exceptions, Lee's people, by his account, are soft, selfish, and unenterprising. The first contingent of mankind to reach this planet has failed to adjust. It'll be a long time before we can hope for anything better from my world. The poor unfortunates in the village over there have branched off into some kind of ghastly psychobiological *cul-de-sac*. They must all be old people now, and I can't see how they can possibly breed in personal isolation. They're defeated. It seems that much rests on you now, Rosala."

She thought for a little, then said : "It's fine to feel you're important and significant, isn't it ? But I'm still dependent—on you. It means little if I can't do it without you."

"But of course we'll work at it together. This is the sort of opportunity to build and create that I've been looking for, without consciously realising it."

She sighed contentedly. "Then we have a purpose in life, Sherry, and we have each other. What else could we possibly need?"

"Well, there's food, for one thing," he smiled, patting the bag over his shoulder.

"We've got that. So let's begin."

They walked arm in arm up the road, talking excitedly, exchanging ideas and telling of their adventures.

"So you knew of the Creedos in the woods, and yet you dared them, because of me," Sherret said. "What a woman!"

"Nonsense. I came by the stream, all the way. Lee had told me all about the Creedos, you see. I knew the right thing to do. You didn't."

"We live and learn," he said. "I've learned a lot on this trip. It seems to me that life is just one long trek to Na-Abiza—and back."

—William F. Temple

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# NO LONGER ALONE

by JOHN [ASHCROFT

---

## Chapter One

*With the sea surrounding me, I was afraid. In view of the crisis, it seemed not merely odd but also ironic that so much water could exist anywhere. This morning I reached the Southern Continent, ill from the tireless heave and fall of waves but otherwise unhurt. After hiding the boat in a rocky inlet I travelled with my provisions several miles inland.*

*The nights here are colder than ours, and the sky greedily sucks the warmth from the land—but I was too impatient to wait till summer moved southward. I am writing with the moons as my torches, sheltering behind a boulder from freezing winds that brush the desert. Stars glint overhead, despite the moonlight; but they'll be lost, of course, when Gann-Shuva rises.*

*Strange to think that four centuries ago my ancestors thought the moons were the homes of their gods—strange, and almost amusing. As for remoter beliefs and history, well, if my theory and bearings are correct I shall perhaps find evidence soon.*

A detachment on training manouvres found his boat, and slowly a search cordon expanded through the hills.



*Two days since my previous notes. The land around me resembles antique pictures of the Realm of the Dead : long-dry riverbeds writhe between rock columns grotesquely sculptured by the wind—one beside me in this valley, standing huge and pale in Gann-Shuva's light, could well be the mythical judgment pillar of the gods.*

*Surely the resemblance cannot be dismissed as coincidence. Before the Darkness, my ancestors saw this country, and remembered, leaving tales or pictures that became legends to their children's children, memories of some distant morning.*

*Surprising what can be learned in so little time. Two centuries since the first Alva ventured south seeking the rim of the world ; but finding perhaps a lonely death . A hundred and ninety years since his son dared follow, vanishing equally without trace. And the more recent voyages, till Gulfig the Mad reached the Southland—or claimed he did—returning with two survivors from a crew of eighteen, all demented with heat and thirst, babbling of men with weirdly hued skin. But perhaps people should have listened more and laughed less. If only someone had returned, sane, from exploration . . .*

*The Darkness lasted far too long. Despite recent advances in astronomy and metallurgy, we're still ignorant, tightly gripped by the linger of primitive beliefs.*

*And a patrol stumbled on his traces, and followed, watching like birds from distant crags while he picked his road inland from the sea.*

*The discovery I made today will have almost as much impact on my people as did the revelations of the motion of the world and its moons around the sun. I found—or I was shown—the City of the Gods.*

*The ruins lay like dunes and rock pillars in the desolation, scarcely attracting a second glance. Then, by wild chance, a windstorm struck, stripping away the drifts. I crouched astonished, shielding my eyes and nostrils from stinging sand, while around me rose stonework from the vanishing mounds—red columns standing in the boiling clouds, mosaics meeting dust-dimmed sunlight after ageless burial : enough sand was shifted by the storm to reveal pillars and arches, walls and furnishings and the remains of carved fountains—fountains, in a land dying of thirst . . . The world must have been different when this city was new.*

*The mosaics are incomplete and ravaged by time, and illustrate mechanisms beyond my comprehension, although we may yet learn much by studying them. And some display a land like Paradise, with fruits and grasses thriving, and people swimming in the rivers. Gulfig spoke the truth . . . Much may be symbolic in these glass pictures, and perhaps the skin colours are not to be taken literally. But, surely, with green glass available to depict leaves and people, the artists would not have used another colour for some of the swimmers?*

*No longer can we doubt the basic truth of our legends. Once, how long ago I daren't guess, my ancestors helped erect this city. They themselves were the gods who fell in some forgotten catastrophe, leaving dimly remembered tales to scare the young and amuse the old and tease the scholar.*

*Once, these deserts were fertile and the people prospered, and the world was controlled and enjoyed, not meekly obeyed. Those days might yet return. If, as Gulfig said, the descendants of that other race survive, we might work with them despite their revolting colour. The weapons we are making should be forgotten—this is an opportunity to learn the art of building and forget the art of destruction.*

*After sundown the risen moons moved above, bone discs amid the stars. Then the west paled as great Gann-Shuva rose, pouring its radiance like the legendary rains upon the land, whitely, lighting the carvings in midnight fire. Exhilarated by the success of my quest, I walked in the ruins, too fascinated for thirst or hunger. Perhaps my discovery will lead my people from the darkness along a new road of self-awareness. They will surely . . .*

Out of the moonlight sprang the patrol.

"Be seated," invited the Ruler. "What have you learned?"

The Interrogator relaxed in a chair and scratched his left elbow where a sandfly had stung viciously.

"The prisoner's language is very similar to ours," he said. "It is evidently a dialect of ours—or perhaps vice versa. He has some interesting but hardly useful views on local history, and claims he came to confirm them."

"Has he given any information of military value?"

"Oh yes. He responded well to questioning—burning made him extremely eager to talk. He's a pacifist, of feeble will, but pacifists are in the minority in the North—his people actually

intend to invade us within a few years." The Interrogator smiled scornfully. "We needn't fear the outcome of any such invasion—the rabble up there are still waving swords and pikes."

"Do we outnumber them, Interrogator?"

"Yes. But their continent is as barren as ours. There can be no question of preserving them as slaves—the land cannot support both races. To benefit materially we'll have to exterminate them."

"We should do so anyway," remarked the Ruler in mild rebuke. "I shudder at the prospect of living beside such repulsive creatures."

"Quite," agreed the Interrogator. "I haven't enjoyed close contact with him. But he may be useful to us."

"Oh? How?"

"Hasten our invasion—meanwhile sending him back to warn his fellows."

"Are you insane?" demanded the Ruler.

The Interrogator scratched nonchalantly and smiled. "The extra month of preparation they'll be given will not prejudice our chance of victory—and, who knows? From my knowledge of the creature, I imagine the news of our imminent arrival will drive them in panic to the remotest hills—where we can exterminate at leisure the ones who haven't starved to death while we settle in. Either that, or they'll all be waiting for us with their swords, and we can slaughter them all in one fine battle."

The Ruler considered carefully, and, with an appreciative chuckle, agreed to the proposal.

The Northerner, hands chained before him, feet shackled, was hauled into the council room by an armed guard. Amid disdainful or shocked stares he came to a jingling halt before the Ruler's chair, and stood visibly shaking.

With unconcealed disgust the Ruler looked down at flesh that would have repelled him even without the scars and sears of torture.

Coldly, he said, "I am Fin-Dahma, Ruler of the Southland. You are brought before me for judgment, spy."

"I am no spy," insisted the Northerner, more in weariness than protest. "I came seeking historical relics, not military information."

"He says—"

"I understand, Interrogator," interrupted Fin-Dahma mildly. "The language is not very different." To the prisoner, he stated, "You have confessed that your people plan an invasion."

"Yes . . . but they thought your people were mythical. Their intentions may change when they know that you exist."

"No doubt," said the Ruler sardonically. "But if they are as nauseated by us as we are nauseated by you, conflict is inevitable. My people would never tolerate the presence of yours except as slaves."

"I admit that my people might feel the same way."

He reeled as the Interrogator struck him, scratching livid nailmarks along his back. The shackles almost tripped him, but a guard wrenched him upright. The chains tore the flesh on his wrists.

"You would enslave us, then?" asked Fin-Dahma softly.

"No."

"You just said that you would."

"I said that my people might, meaning the majority of them. There are some who, like myself, think our races might live in peace."

He lowered his gaze before eyes that dripped contempt like acid on to him. In his nostrils coiled the smell of the foreigners and the stink of his abused body.

"Peace?" echoed the Ruler bitterly. "Look." He pointed through one window. Far away, harsh rock baked in the sun, and desert rippled interminably. "Our land is dying around us, and yours is no better, and there is not enough food for both races."

"If we joined our labours . . ." said the prisoner. "If we could refine the seawater—make an irrigation network . . ."

"And where will we find the technical knowledge?" asked the Ruler sarcastically.

"We might learn something from the ruins—"

"Those ruins, bared and buried by seasonal winds, are the wrecks of a race that fell. Their knowledge failed to save them—how shall it save us?"

"A solution must emerge if we work together," insisted the prisoner.

In contemptuously final tones, Fin-Dahma said, "We could never work with animals such as you."

Somewhere an insect hummed in the silence that came.

"One question," said Fin-Dahma. "If two men crossing the desert have provisions merely for one to reach the town, what should they do?"

Unhesitatingly the prisoner said, "Share."

"So that *both* die in the sand?"

"They must risk finding more food further along the way."

Pitying smiles spread. Someone laughed aloud; the sound rang briefly in the hall.

"We have a better solution. There may be no food further along the way: one should die, rather than both—the stronger must leave the weaker."

In sudden scorn the Northener said, "Then you're savages."

He winced as the Interrogator moved to flail at him.

"Let him be," ordered Fin-Dahma. "Spy, do you see behind me, in the wall niches, a row of skulls?"

The Northerner's eyes moved from the carved chair and the Ruler to the plain stonework, the hanging weapons, and the dull white stare, eyeless and fleshless, of bone in dark crannies.

The rhythm of his twin hearts became sickening.

"Greet them," said Fin-Dahma benignly. "They belonged to some of your ancestors who reached our land over the past two centuries."

*The first Alva*, thought the prisoner in horror. *And his son, and the others . . . they didn't drown—they landed here and left their skulls as ornaments in a foreigner's hall.*

He saw then the man who stood beside him holding a silver axe. Jewels on its haft burned in the glow of torches.

"Tomorrow," said Fin-Dahma, "you will be given your writing tools and other implements; your food and water containers will be replenished, and you will be sent from my land. You may take your boat and warn your people that mine are coming. Tell them to meet us in battle, or retreat to die later—the choice is theirs, and we shall display no mercy."

Disbelieving, and with selfish relief weakening his limbs, the prisoner said, "You are releasing me?"

"Yes," said Fin-Dahma graciously. "You will be taking a convincing message to your people."

As the Ruler issued orders the prisoner fought desperately, almost sobbing for breath. His left hand was unchained and forced on to the Punishing Stone. The axe of the Punisher made one curving flash. Fingers still clenching and unclenching, the hand dropped to the floor. With glazing eyes

the prisoner saw tongs pick up the hand and toss it into a fire. He remembered the crackle and smell of burning, then his wrist was thrust into something that seared, and he fell in twisting collapse.

Next morning, eyes that held triumph or satisfaction, hate or disgust, but no pity, watched as he left the buildings and walked into the arid hills, stumbling here and there like a sleepwalker.

*How can I face my people, disfigured like this? The prospect of death in the Outland among the cripples haunts me. But I must go and warn my people. And, yet, what will this accomplish? If they retreat they'll perish in the wilderness: if they fight, they'll be massacred.*

*Is there no other solution? We need plans, not war: a vast effort to labour together, sharing our resources, both technical and agricultural.*

*But could we ever live with such brutal savages?*

*Writing with this hand is difficult and tiring.*

*The men who built this city—surely, if they could carve stone and raise such arches, they could plan their world to grow food? But they died, and their city lies half buried around me.*

*Kolda's plan to bring the sea into the desert seems the whim of a madman, but not as insane as the idea of drenching the desert with blood . . .*

That night, a sentry glancing skyward saw a star appear where none should shine. While he watched in curiosity that gave way to alarm, and while others looked up and shouted, the star became a disc and the disc became a globe, dazzling the eyes that rose in superstitious fear to follow its approach. The globe fell between the crescents, brightly crossing Gann-Shuva's night half, and slid past the lesser moon, swelling like a bubble nearing the surface of a great dark sea.

Now the streets were crowded.

Into the pool of the sky dropped the silver pebble, and emerald ripples went pulsing out to the shores of midnight. The globe veered sideways, hissing faintly, casting its shadow briefly across the watchers; it pursued the third moon down towards the mountains, sinking gently in front of the peaks, to touch the desert beyond Fin-Dahma's city.

And the loneliness of another world had ended.

Frosted by Gann-Shuva's light, the starship waited for the morning.

## Chapter Two

Seafarmer walked slowly down the ramp into savagely glaring sunlight. His helmet filters clicked, adjusting till the view became more comfortable to his eyes. The reception committee stiffened and watched while his red-clad figure reached the sand. He paused, scuffling his feet, enjoying the feel of the ground, flexing his limbs for a moment, and then walked towards the apparent leader of the party.

"Watch them," advised Welder's voice into his helmet. "They look trigger-happy, especially the group on your left—those things are definitely firearms."

"I'll watch them," said Seafarmer almost grimly, scarcely moving his lips. "They look human enough to shoot first and parley later. If mouth movement's any indication of speech, they must be gabbling twenty to the dozen, but all I'm picking up are footsteps and so on—I'll shift frequencies a little."

Cautiously he raised one hand to adjust the knob on the side of his helmet, widening the frequency selection until a sudden burst of babbling made him start. He lowered the volume and listened.

"Yes—I'm receiving them now. Birdlike is the closest description I can offer. Sing-song, too : it might even depend on pitch as much as on consonants and vowels."

With his voice lifted into the same range, he announced, "Peace is our mission."

A flurry of motion rippled in the watchers, and they became silent. He repeated the phrase and walked a few paces closer to them. Tubes rose, glinting like copper, to point unhesitatingly at him : the crowd bristled like a porcupine. Despite the cooling of his suit, tension and the sight of the great white sun drenching the desert in its glare brought prickling sweat out on his face and body. He was uncomfortably aware that the ends of the crowd were surreptitiously curving to enfold him like a stealthy fist.

Abruptly, in very human fashion, the central figure nudged one of its fellows. The nudged one began moving reluctantly to meet him.

Although—or perhaps because—his nerves were taut, Seafarmer had to smile. *A volunteer has been picked*, he thought ironically.

Gaining confidence, or through bravado, the alien walked with loping ease, sunlight shining from the glossy blue of its flesh ; it halted several feet from him and waited, scrutinising him.

It was incredibly humanoid : a biped, with long graceful arms ending in flat hands with spiky fingers. It stood two feet taller than him, but was spindlier. It's bare feet were oddly like those of a wading-bird, with slatey blue webbing. It was naked, and apparently male, although Seafarmer hesitated to make a definite decision at first study. The shoulders were narrow and sloping, and the neck was slim, longer than that of a man in proportion to the body.

Silently it stared down at him.

Its head reminded him comically of an onion, balled, glossy, on its stalk. The face was almost shockingly human, in the manner that an animal's face can be : despite the glaring sun, its eyes stared widely, brownly ; there was no nose as such—merely two vast nostrils protected from dust by hairy strands sprouting from within the cavities and hanging like a curtain over part of the immense mouth. Its ears were large and mobile, elfinly sharp.

Lethargically, almost absently, the creature combed aside the hairy strands with a sharply tipped finger and scraped delicately with the nail within its left nostril. Seafarmer hardly knew whether to feel insulted, amused or revolted. Then the creature lowered the hand, lazily, and shifted its weight from one foot to the other. To Seafarmer this casual swaying seemed ominous, as if the alien were preparing to spring at him.

Wordlessly it surveyed him, blinking its folded wrinkled eyelids from time to time.

He spoke again.

The alien chattered anxiously.

Its fellows listened intently. Recording equipment whirred within the starship.

Slowly, and narrowing his eyes despite the filters, Seafarmer raised one gloved hand and pointed into the sky, looking upwards.

All around him, the aliens looked up, wide eyes flashing back the sunlight.

He lowered his arm, avoiding swift movement, and half turned and pointed at the *Starbird*, scattering those who had moved behind him. Hundreds of eyes surveyed the sheening



hull. Then, with quiet care, Seafarmer extended his open hand, palm upwards, towards the alien. After a long pause the alien imitated the gesture. Its hand was scaly, with creased flesh of a duller slate colour in the palm, as on its chest and belly and feet. The long thin fingers ended in vicious tips like nails or claws. Seafarmer moved his hand closer to the alien's, praying that there would be no misinterpretation. Gently he tried to clasp the hand. The alien started rigidly and pulled away. He let go. Tubes glittered, pointing at his chest. He licked the saltiness from his lips and tried again. This time the alien seemed more ready for his action. Seafarmer gripped the hand, not too tightly; then he released it and lowered his hand to his side and stood waiting.

After a pause that seemed minutes the alien extended its hand. Hope thumped in Seafarmer's pulse as the alien gingerly took hold of his gloved hand and gripped it more tightly, with increasing confidence.

He felt his chest tightening, and had the mad feeling that he should cry, shout, faint, or perform an exultant dance on the sand. *The first, he thought, the first meeting between humanity and others—not counting Sanderson and Guide—that was so long ago, and different. But this is here, now, and we have to set a precedent that can never be forgotten.*

"John," he said in a low unsteady voice, "send the Talker."

Still clasping the vaguely retilian hand, he turned to see the squat little machine come drifting from the ramp. The aliens watched soundlessly as the Talker purred over to Seafarmer and settled on the sand. From each side of the machine uncoiled wires ending in tiny metal discs.

Gently he disengaged his hand from the clasp, and held one set of wires. He operated the small lock in his helmet, allowing the perfectly fitting wires to pass inside. Suspiciously the alien stooped to peer into his facepiece and watch as the discs settled and clung like leeches on his temples. Seafarmer held the second set of wires, demonstrating by mime how they should be applied, and offered them to the alien.

Bony, scaly blue fingers fumbled with the wires, catching them under nails. Wide insectile brown eyes studied the discs. All around, the tubes never lowered beneath Seafarmer's waist. The alien looked for guidance to its leader. The leader uttered shrill commands. Cautiously the alien touched its forehead

with the discs, stiffening in surprise as they moved seeking the strongest impulses. The discs settled, and the alien stood as if in a dream. Seafarmer felt the tingling, and the beginning of darkness.

He sat slowly at the feet of the crowd, and then lay back, breathing deeply, his eyes closed and his mind forming wordless prayers—so many things could go wrong, so many things could, so many, so . . . his last impression was of Welder announcing, as if from vast distances in the night, that the alien had also lain down. And then moonless sea drowned him, silently.

Two hours passed. Shadows crawled over the sand.

The aliens gathered in groups and argued together, glancing now and again at where their fellow and Seafarmer lay like corpses on either side of the humming machine.

The discs fell from the alien's head. The wires wound themselves back into the Talker. Dazedly the alien stirred and sat up, blinking rapidly, and then scrambled to its feet and began trying to answer anxious questions. Light dawned in Seafarmer's mind, and he heard the tiny tinkle of the discs falling loosely on their wires within his helmet. He rolled over slightly, and pushed at the desert with his hands and sat up and then rose slowly to his feet. While silence returned around him, he disconnected the wires and let them go curling back into the machine. Exhilaration filled him; already, from what he had heard on recovering, he knew that the Talker had succeeded.

Into the hush, he announced, "Now we can converse."

The words went from his transmitter to the Talker, blocked by his helmet from the aliens, and were spat from the machine in the local language.

The crowd stood in consternation, looking from the man to the machine.

"The machine is my voice," he said. It was the simplest explanation he could concoct at the time.

With awed jubilation the crowd thickened around him and the machine, peering, gesturing and arguing, but never quite daring to touch anything. The Talker tried to keep pace, transmitting to his helmet. The combination of alien language and translation was deafening—then he turned his external pickup down to normal frequency range, fading out the voices and leaving the sounds from the Talker. He felt like a pygmy

in a packed room. If only to stop the gabble, he stated, loudly and clearly, "We have travelled from another world, and wish to help you. Will you welcome us, and accept our aid if there is any we can offer?"

One distinct voice uttered orders, and the mob parted, and the leader stepped up to stare down at him with shimmering discs of eyes.

"I am Fin-Dahma, Ruler of the Southland. My people welcome you, and will be pleased to receive your assistance."

"I am Seafarmer, leader of this expedition. We will be pleased to assist you."

*We've made it*, he thought jubilantly.

"Beyond the central sea," said Fin-Dahma, "live people of nauseating colour and beliefs with whom we prepare to make war. Perhaps you will aid us to exterminate them."

In Seafarmer's stomach something moved icily, and this confirmation of his small fears filled him with angry disappointment.

"Will you help us?" asked Fin-Dahma urgently.

Slowly Seafarmer asked, "Why are you at war?"

"We need the land of those people—such as it is."

"Have you never considered sharing it?"

The words provoked a hush during which the Talker picked up one aghast murmur: ". . . mad, like the Northerner . . ."

Then Fin-Dahma said, "Sharing is an admission of weakness, the adoption of an unrealistic approach to life, unworthy of adults."

In anger conveyed by the Talker, Seafarmer snapped, "War is a game for children who must yet grow up and see that progress comes from helping, not from slaying. *Yours* is the unrealistic approach to life, worthy merely of animals and infants."

Over the desert descended a horrified silence.

Offendedly, Fin-Dahma said, "Despite your offer, then, you refuse to help us?"

"We'll help you—but help for you must not mean death for others."

The Ruler's eyes moved slowly from the *Starbird's* gigantic hull to the stocky shape of Seafarmer.

"We refuse to admit that war can solve a problem," added the man candidly.

"Perhaps you are too weak to make war," said Fin-Dahma shrewdly. "You understand transport and machinery and languages, but perhaps you lack the power and courage to kill."

He turned and gestured to one of his guards. The spectators scrambled from the line of fire as the guard braced a weapon against his chest. The weapon banged and flashed, kicking at blue flesh on his ribs. Some projectile struck sparks and fragments from a distant rock, to keen off into the blare of sunheat.

"Well?" asked Fin-Dahma in tones of satisfaction.

"Children will have their playthings," remarked Seafarmer.

Lazily he raised one arm in signal.

The crowd ducked instinctively as overhead passed an unseen wave that made the sun's light and heat seem dim and cool for an instant. Far off, on a rocky slope, a boulder weighing a hundred tons glowed and smoked and bubbled. Dust billowed, and roaring heat baked the flinching crowd. Something intolerably dazzling flashed within the dust-clouds, then the dust had gone, and the boulder was a thick puddle that smoked and trickled redly down the hillside.

Boredly, Seafarmer brushed a blue metallic insect from his facepiece.

"Well?" he asked sweetly.

Fin-Dahma stood staring strickenly at the oozing fire.

Slowly he turned to face the little man. In awed but envious tones, he asked, "What was that weapon?"

"The toy of a dangerous child," replied Seafarmer nonchalantly. "If we wished, in two days we could melt your towns and leave nothing alive, animal or plant or insect, on the whole world. But that's the way of children, and we're adults. Consider what you have seen and what I've told you, and come here tomorrow at this time—then we can talk again, and perhaps arrange aid for your people."

Deliberately, but with a spine that tingled electrically in expectation of angry shots, he turned and strode through the throng and up the ramp and into the ship, followed by the hovering Talker. The ramp retracted into the hull, and the ship's skin sealed itself perfectly. The hull basked peacefully over its oval shadow.

In the ship, with his helmet off, Seafarmer relaxed and let his tension dissolve into laughter while Welder and the others slapped him on the back and jostled and joked.

On the desert, the subdued crowd stood watching the slowly congealing splash of lava. Then Fin-Dahma ordered his guards into formation around him, and they marched stiffly back towards the city, followed by the curious stragglers. Shadows and insects and minutely rubbing sandgrains moved alone in the land around the ship.

While evening deepened, fireflies moved back and forth between the lower peaks and the moonlit glint of the starship. Lights glimmered in the mountains. The fireflies flashed like jewels occasionally as they turned and reflected the stare of moons. And, once, a thin distant humming was heard from across the desert.

The Military Adviser cursed half superstitiously as he squinted out into the night.

"Pick a spy who knows the arts of self-concealment," ordered Fin-Dahma. "Camouflage him and send him to see what those creatures are doing."

The Military Adviser glanced at Gann-Shuva. Already the world's shadow was creeping over the swollen moon, tinting its whiteness with coppery red.

"The eclipse will be complete soon, Fin-Dahma—if the spy hurries he can arrive there in darkness." He walked away and shouted orders, and returned to state that a man would be leaving very soon.

"And if he learns nothing tonight," said the Ruler, "send him tomorrow, and again, and again: we must know what's happening."

"I saw another flying thing go along the peaks in that direction," said the Military Adviser, pointing. "Shall I send another spy there?"

"No . . . only the ruins lie yonder. Our main concern is the activity nearest our city."

Worriedly they stood watching together. The fireflies travelled back and forth, tirelessly, throughout the frigid night.

Smith and Rivermaker landed the drifter in a dry gully and walked amid the ruins, filming as they went.

"This is eerie," commented Smith. "Like being in a floodlit graveyard . . ."

Gann-Shuva blazed whitely, but the ruddy shadow was stealthily cloaking it. Above the peaks that stood guard behind the ruins, one slender crescent was following the

memory of the sun. Near the zenith, a lesser moon stared down on pillars that lay broken in the sand, half buried. From pale humped dunes rose fragmented walls and stairways and carved furnishings, casting black shadows across the drifts. Here and there, mosaics glowed redly, greenly, glass fire in the wreckage of the fall.

Looking about him at the worn sculpture, Rivermaker said, "I have a feeling that more than climatic changes wiped out whatever civilisation built this city—there are signs of destruction as well as decay."

"Earthquake, perhaps," suggested Smith.

"No—I was thinking of a war."

"But the climate did change drastically," said Smith. "My guess is that there was a fluctuation in solar heat—just a fraction, really, but enough to seriously affect life here. Possibly they were lucky to avoid a nova, or even a super—"

He paused in mid-sentence as somewhere a movement caught his eye. He glanced at the opposite side of the courtyard, in time to glimpse a slender form flitting from one column to another. For a moment his pulse jumped nervously.

He pointed. Rivermaker stared. Something squeezed itself through a fissure in one wall, a sudden darkness in the moonlit gap.

"One of the locals, I think," said Rivermaker with unnecessary quietness. "Shall we ignore it, or prowl round there?"

"Let's take a look—but go carefully. Those guns they have might knock a hole through our suits—and even if they didn't penetrate, the concussion wouldn't be healthy for us."

The gap proved too narrow to admit a pressure-clothed man. They walked steadily round the outside of the courtyard. Behind the wall, great inky shadows hid from Gann-Shuva. A form rose awkwardly among tumbled masonry and turned to flee. Smith switched on his torch, projecting a white beam that lit the fugitive. As the men ran forward the alien tripped, probably panicking, and fell headlong in the sand. They ran up and stood over it. The creature tensed its lanky body, sprawling at their feet, turning its head on an elastic neck to watch them with eyes that flared brightly in the torchlight.

"Don't blind him," said Rivermaker. "He's scared witless."

"A different colour," said Smith excitedly. "This must be one of the Northerners—it saves a trip up there if we take him back with us."

"John . . . look at his hand." Rivermaker moved the torch in Smith's grasp, directing its beam at the arm. The alien flinched protectively, doubling the arm under his body, permitting them one horrid glimpse.

"That looked recent—and infected," said Smith. "Maybe we can clean it a bit."

They bent, gently gripped the alien under his arms and helped him to his feet. For all his height, he stood as if dazed or numbed by exhaustion and fear, offering no resistance while they led him round the ruins to the drifter. They helped the alien inside: he squatted with bowed head and scared eyes between the seats, gripping at the transparent hull with rattling fingernails as the desert dropped from beneath. Now the world's shadow was reddening the whole of Gann-Shuva, and the peaks were tinted ruddily. Without a sound, phantom-like the drifter moved above the rock towards the distantly glittering starship.

### Chapter Three

"These people are not merely physically close to us," said Welder. "Their culture is fantastically close in time to ours, on an astronomical scale. Alva's race is at roughly the stage of the Ancient Greeks—architecture and the arts are flourishing, but science is still hamstrung by superstition. He seems to be one of the more progressive members. Basically they aren't warlike, despite some minor squabbling among themselves—but lack of resources was driving them towards an invasion of this continent." He chuckled sourly. "They're lucky they never began it—the war would have been short and sharp."

"War?" echoed Rivermaker, smiling. "Call it a tribal skirmish."

"By Earth's illustrious standards, that's all it is," admitted Seafarmer. "But to these people it's a war—which the Southerners would have won: they're tougher, cruder characters, with a technology advanced enough to make firearms—you can compare them with the Europeans in the late Middle Ages."

"Both races grasped the concept of spaceflight pretty smartly," remarked Rivermaker. "They've a good idea of basic astronomy."

"Small wonder," retorted Welder, "with a battalion of moons circling all ways for them to study."

"Given the opportunity, they might be catching us up within a couple of centuries," mused Smith. "The way we handle this will become a yardstick—we can't afford to mess up this situation or we'll have failed on our first big challenge."

"I don't want to hurt their pride too much," said Seafarmer. "Humility's fine for the soul, but they might get embittered by an overdose."

"We hurt their pride yesterday when we melted that rock," said Welder, grinning at the memory. "They must have felt horribly small."

Mason strolled in and said, "They're on the way now—just left the village."

"The *city*," corrected Rivermaker. "Remember their pride."

This time Seafarmer waited at the foot of the ramp so that the aliens had to walk up to him. Beside him, the Talker stood purring like a cat. He noted with wry amusement that the guns were being handled with far less swagger—yesterday's lesson must have been quite humbling.

Fin-Dahma strode forward to greet him. Seafarmer welcomed him.

"Will you come inside to speak with me?" he asked. "If you wish, one of my men will remain outside as a hostage."

With defiance and dignity Fin-Dahma said, "I need no hostage." He followed Seafarmer and the Talker up into the ship. The ramp remained extended; the entrance remained open. The guards lounged in the glare of the sun, with steadily decreasing vigilance. One urinated on to the sand. A group squatted in the ship's shade to play a game with things like dice. Three of them practised their marksmanship; sporadic shots echoed from the hills, the only sound save for the cry of a birdlike thing that zigzagged far above, black and tiny in a great white sky.

Fin-Dahma took the seat prepared for him at one side of the table: with mild disdain he noted the simplicity of the room, the lack of hanging weapons or trophies, and the clean lighting that lacked the convivial warmth of torches. The only ornament was a small plaque with alien writing on it, which he assumed to be of social or religious import. It read, *Press in Emergency*.



Seafarmer sat opposite him. The more he studied the strands hanging from the Ruler's nostrils, the more they reminded him incongruously of an overgrown droopy moustache.

In one corner the Talker purred softly. Seafarmer relaxed, wishing that he could take off his pressure suit.

"Now," he said. "Why are you about to invade the North?"

Fin-Dahma gave him the type of frigid glance once used by colonels to rebuke bumptious privates.

"I told you yesterday," he reminded him levelly. "There are insufficient fertile areas to support both races; also, we are short of useful metals."

"Your world was not always barren," ventured Seafarmer.

"No . . . There are legends, and ruins—apparently our race once lived with the Northerners until some catastrophe overthrew their cities, and now we're developing towards civilisation from scattered tribes of survivors."

Seafarmer studied the Ruler with new respect: so cogent a reply was unexpected. For the first time he appreciated the age of the alien—Fin-Dahma's people probably respected him as much for his years as for his position.

"From our admittedly brief studies, it appears that several thousands of years ago the climate of your world was radically altered leaving deserts where seas had been and canyons that were rivers."

"And insufficient vital resources to be shared," said the Ruler with calm insistence.

"And there was a war," continued Seafarmer, ignoring the remark. "Why?"

Fin-Dahma blinked lazily, covering his eyes with wizened skin.

"I fail to understand how my ancestors ever lived at all with those creatures. They are revoltingly coloured and follow a foreign philosophy."

"My colour is different, and so is my philosophy—but you were willing to to work with me."

"You are strange in another way: further, you are not even of this world. But the Northerners are similar to us, and perhaps it is the similarity more than the difference that makes them so revolting to our eyes."

"On my world, Fin-Dahma, are people with many colours of skin and many philosophies—but they regard each other as

parts of the race, all entitled to live as they wish providing they respect the wishes of others."

"It sounds unlikely and unrealistic."

"It took us a long time to learn," said Seafarmer bitterly. "Our tolerance was gained through experience of intolerance, and we want to prevent others from making the same tragic mistakes."

Fin-Dahma watched him from under wrinkled hoods of eyelids.

"What do you wish us to do?" he asked slowly.

"Work with the Northerners to refine the seawater and irrigate the deserts and remake this world."

Fin-Dahma regarded him coldly. "Even if we could tolerate the company of those creatures, neither race has the technical knowledge or resources to undertake such a project."

"But we can provide them," said Seafarmer. "Look."

Diagrams appeared on one wall. He talked earnestly for two hours, illustrating the plans. Fin-Dahma studied, argued, pondered and marvelled and quibbled over details. Finally, he rose and asked to be shown out to explain the situation to his council.

"Will our offer be regarded as a useful one?"

Fin-Dahma hesitated, scratching with a black nail behind his nostril strands. "Perhaps," he admitted cautiously. "But, before accepting any such offer, we should require tangible evidence of your abilities."

The dice were hastily gathered and tucked inside an ammunition sling, and the guards raised their guns and formed lines on either side of their Ruler.

He walked deep in thought across the desert.

Halfway to his city, where illness and poverty roamed like animals, he paused to glance back. The starship shone in the sun, a silver egg ready to hatch forth creatures that might devour his land.

Worries knotted in his mind. From winter stars had descended strangers with power and wild plans, and his people were no longer alone in the universe. He recognised, even then somewhere within him, that whatever decision he made his people could not be as once they were. In one night their eyes had been raised from dust to the dark skies, and dust would never satisfy them now.

Seafarmer sat back in his chair. Part of the wall slid aside, and Alva stepped into the room, light shimmering on his green flesh. He sat down, regarding Seafarmer with sombre eyes.

"Well, Alva—could you live in peace with his race?"

"I don't know . . . I had convinced myself that I could, until he walked in—and then all I could think of was this." And he looked at his sawn-off stub of a forearm, shivering slightly in revulsion.

"So you'll forever hate his race."

"No . . . My mind will accept them, but my instincts make me shrink from them. His race will feel the same way towards mine. Two centuries of gradual education might be necessary."

Seafarmer stared deliberately at the scars and the cruel amputation. "After such treatment, could you forgive them?"

Alva thought for a long time. "They treated me as my people might have treated a spy from their land. I wasn't a spy, of course—but I can understand their attitude. I can't bear grudge without condemning my own people. Perhaps I'm not quite sane."

Seafarmer laughed delightedly. "This universe needs madmen, Alva. I'm glad we found you. Mercy and forgiveness are both respected by my people, and it's good to travel so far and still find them."

Wistfully, Alva said, "Have you the power to rejuvenate our world as you claim? Limited irrigation is feasible, yes; but total transformation is too vast a project."

"One day you'll see my world and walk on prairies that once were deserts. And you'll learn that nothing is too vast for maniacs to tackle. Lunacy triumphs where reason would admit defeat."

"Like the Southerner, I require a convincing demonstration."

"Perhaps that can be arranged," said Seafarmer.

Weapons clashed in rhythmic salute as the Military Adviser entered. The guards closed the doors and the Military Adviser strode to the Ruler's seat, followed respectfully by the spy.

"Well?" asked Fin-Dahma. "What have you learned?"

The spy paused apprehensively, and then admitted, "Nothing."

Fin-Dahma was too intelligent to yield to the fury seething within his old body.

In a taut, quiet voice he asked, "Why have you learned nothing?"

The spy moved his feet nervously, fumbling for words. "I approached the area of activities—at least, as closely as I could. Flying things were passing to and fro, over me, and the lights were still flashing beyond the boulders—but the barrier stopped me."

"Barrier—which barrier?"

Helplessly the spy said, "There was no visible wall—nothing at all—simply something that stopped me, bruising my knees and face as though I had walked into a cliffside. And the boulders blocked my view of what the strangers are doing."

"Did you try to walk *round* this barrier?"

"Yes—it encircles the area."

"How high is it? Have we any means of learning that?"

"I threw stones as high as I could, risking detection—all of them bounced back. The barrier is like an invisible bowl, covering the entire area."

Desperation chilled Fin-Dahma. In the silence, a night-beetle droned leisurely near the carved stonework of the ceiling. The councillors stood looking worriedly at each other.

Then, wisely, Fin-Dahma asked, "Did you try to tunnel *under* the barrier?"

"Yes . . . it apparently continues into the ground—further than I could dig."

In exasperation, the Ruler said, "I begin to wonder just how strong these strangers are. Did you climb the mountains in daylight to look down on the area?"

"Yes," said the spy feebly. The tone of his voice sent a thrill of dread through Fin-Dahma. "I could see nothing—only rock and sand, as though reflected in a mirror—but those flying machines can pass through the reflection. I watched them vanishing and appearing again."

The night-beetle settled on a ledge, vibrating its wings and flashing greenly in the shadows.

Eyes swivelled uneasily in the hall.

With little conviction, the Military Adviser said, "Perhaps we should try to drive them out by force."

Fin-Dahma laughed in bleak mockery. "You saw what they did to that rock. And we'd be mad to antagonise

creatures who might be able to solve our crop problems, even if they hadn't the power to destroy us. Conflict would be a waste of time and lives."

"What of the Northerners?" asked a councillor. "If the land is replenished, will we still make war on them?"

"That can be considered later," said Fin-Dahma. "Perhaps when the star-creatures have left us—if they leave us," he added ominously.

"Yes," said the Military Adviser. "My secret fear is that another purpose brought them here—they might replenish the world, and then take it from us."

"I have already thought of that," admitted Fin-Dahma soberly.

Before him, the spy glanced up in startled fright. The Ruler turned to look, and horror brushed his spine furrily. High in one niche, a skull was watching with a green fire eye that silently shifted its stare towards him.

For a nauseating instant his double heart tightened in pain; then the night-beetle droned from the socket to settle in the other one, lighting the cavity with cool fire, and the beetle crept about, exploring, so that the socket became a turning eye that saw consternation slump into uneasy relief throughout the hall. Fin-Dahma relaxed his limbs and laughed aloud, trying to shrug off the frosty thing that clung on his shoulders whispering superstitions. The meeting continued, and from the niche the skull watched like a beast in its lair, one eye caught greenly by a stray moonbeam.

## Chapter Four

On his second visit to the ship, seated in the same room, Fin-Dahma asked, "Whose is the third chair?"

"Mine," replied Alva, entering from another doorway. Fin-Dahma rose jerkily in anger and Alva steadily faced his outraged eyes. Brusquely the Ruler turned to Seafarmer and demanded, "Must I sit at the table with this beast? I sent him home as a warning to his people. Why is he here?"

"Why did you torture him and hack off his hand?"

"Why not?" retorted Fin-Dahma.

"Why?"

With callous logic Fin-Dahma said, "It was necessary as a demonstration of our power."

Coldly Seafarmer said, "It was convincing as a demonstration of your weakness." Then, with violence that made both aliens jump, his mailed hand smacked the table top. His face formed the hideous grimace they were learning to recognise as a smile, and chidingly he said, "You're children, aren't you? Power lies not in the hand that wields the axe, but in the bit of brain that knows the axe is unnecessary. That's power—not over helpless others, but over yourselves."

"You have an insane outlook," remarked Fin-Dahma insultingly.

Seafarmer grinned as though complimented. "Yes, we're maniacs, preaching our lunatic gospel: one day the universe will all be mad and we can rest—till then, we have to cure the sane ones who regard animal squabbling as a pastime for adults."

The aliens stood confused by his caustic comment. He smiled tiredly, feeling older than his thirty years. "Let's sit down," he suggested.

Alva settled quietly into one chair, still watching the Ruler silently. He rested his stump on the table. Uneasy before the scars and quiet eyes and the deformity, Fin-Dahma slowly sat in the second chair.

Seafarmer sat down casually and pointed across the room. The lights went out.

A figure appeared on the luminous wall, running, walking, turning, so that they could study it from all angles.

"Your air is not quite suitable for me," said Seafarmer. "Your days are too hot, and your nights are too cold—hence my protective coverings. This is my actual body."

They stared in repelled fascination.

Beside the figure appeared another, but yellowy instead of black; then a tawny one, and a pinky-white one, and on through varieties of colour and height and cranial structure and hue of hair.

"All these are my people," said Seafarmer in the darkness. "We learned, despite thousands of years of hate or prejudice, to respect the basic unity of the race—so why shouldn't your two races do the same?"

"Is it necessary?" asked Fin-Dahma. "If you rejuvenated our worlds, we could divide it and live apart."

"Nature won't tolerate such artificial boundaries. Progress is towards blending. After centuries of interbreeding we still

have definite races on my home world, but eventually one combined race may evolve. And presumably the same will happen here."

There was a sudden horrified silence.

Then Fin-Dahma uttered a noise like a disgusted snort.

"Interbreed? With those green animals?"

Alva sat motionless, feeling the creep of revulsion.

"Once you have overcome baseless prejudices, who knows?"

Harshly, Alva said, "We have certain standards of decency."

"Artificial ones," remarked Seafarmer, smiling at the impact of his words. "You'll soon see how the application of a little intelligence breaks down false barriers."

In embarrassment, as though discussing obscenities, Alva said, "You imply that you—yourself—would interbreed with those other species we see there."

"You see *one* species," corrected Seafarmer gently. "You're slow to learn. And, yes, I have interbred with other races of my species. The differences between them can be disregarded: earlier prejudices belong on the rubbish heap, together with all the idols and totem poles and sacrificial slabs of childhood."

To their displeasure, both Alva and Fin-Dahma were reminded of ancestors who had bowed to the moons and of less primitive beliefs that still had their followings.

Seafarmer guessed this, and smiled to himself.

"Watch," he said.

The figure faded, and in the wall a metal door appeared, opening heavily on cushioned mountings. A ramp slid downward to touch rock. The illusion was overwhelmingly real: almost it seemed that Seafarmer and the aliens could step forward and follow the man who walked down the ramp and across barren land.

*Slithering in dust that rose like red pepper, MacDunn clambered up the dune. At its crest he unrolled the flag; holding the staff's point between his boots, he reached up, gripped the staff with clumsy gloves, and exerted his weight downwards. The staff slid within dead land, grating on a buried stone. Wind roved icily, furrowing ochre dust and unfurling the flag. The emblem of two clasped hands fluttered pale against darkness.*

*MacDunn stepped back over crunching flints and stood to attention; below the dune, the others listened while he spoke, some erect, some with bowed heads, dust swirling about their knees. Nearby, the ship glittered strange and silver in a hollow*

*made by its fiery breath, where sand had billowed outwards roaring hotly to bare the rock like the black bone of Mars.*

Softly, Seafarmer said, "This is one of the many copies of a record made many centuries ago—it shows the first landing of my people on another world."

*"In deference to those who disbelieve in God, we shall offer no prayers—that's up to the individual, according to his own beliefs. Some of you think we must work out our own salvation or damnation, unguided and unjudged. If so, it's vital that we build and never again destroy."*

Moved, despite his atheism, Minhov listened quietly. Sanderson, the agnostic, watched the dust blow with wondering eyes, while something like a steel-fingered fist clenched around his chest, making him want to sob with wordless emotion.

"Whatever we discover," said MacDunn, his voice thin and flat, "will be immaterial beside the fact that for once in our sordid squalling history we've worked in harmony. Hold the camera steadily, Igor—we want future generations, if there are any, to see this and remember."

*He paused, staring out against a waste of suns.*

"I'm no good at making deathless speeches. But I will say this—that I hope the dimensions of spaceflight make us recognise the stupidity, the futility, and the sheer insignificance of our squalid quarrels on Earth. Now let's go back in and dump these damned helmets and have a drink to celebrate, if there's any left."

*They straggled towards the ship, glancing about them as they walked. One man kicked at the ground, raising thick clouds that hid him for a moment.*

Alva leaned forward intently. "This world reached by your ancestors—was there no life upon it?"

"Yes," replied Seafarmer, with oddly bitter amusement. "Oh, there was life upon it. Pathetic clumps of moss, withering on the rock—thin growths of fernlike things—and even some scraps of cacti, where the last moisture trickled through chasms from the melting ice-caps. Yes, there was life, if you can call it life, in a few places. But most of the world was like *this*."

*Beyond the ship, dunes rolled endlessly. Here and there jutted a dark snag of rock, like a rotten tooth. Wind played with the*



*sand. The sun burned brightly but far and shrunken above the hills, yet the sky was a wintry midnight where stars sparkled like frost.*

*A wraith of dust strolled silently, stars twinkling coolly through its twines. The dust walked unhurt on rock sharpened into black daggers by the sand, on, over land the colour of autumn, red and gold, already browning into the rustle of bleak sere winter. And the dust was all that moved in the land. Then the wind died and the dust fell, and nothing moved, anywhere.*

Fin-Dahma stiffened curiously. "What's that?"

From the hills projected a column, one edge glinting dully, the rest of it dark against the stars. It climbed the sky, beyond the top of the screen.

"You'll learn later," promised Seafarmer, and the lights came on.

Alva sat still for a long moment, and then stood up and carefully studied the blank wall. Fin-Dahma rested crossed arms on the table and said, "That was an interesting demonstration, Seafarmer. We have artists who can portray a scene or a person, but none whose paintings move or speak. We should like to learn that technique."

"You'll learn many techniques, Fin-Dahma: but priority must be given to survival techniques."

Seafarmer looked at the two aliens and wondered just how much was penetrating their minds beyond the levels of envy or selfishness.

Abruptly he stood up. "Come with me," he invited them. "It's time to show you something else."

He led them through corridors to the great lock. For an instant, standing on the ramp, he recalled MacDunn's group walking from their ship into history. So few centuries, he thought, since they risked their lives to cross the stream in a flimsy coracle, beginning the charting of the rivers of the Sun—and now the *Starbird's* left the rivers to sail right across the sea. And somewhere, sometime, my descendants will remember me as I remember MacDunn; then the *Starbird* will seem as frail and small as the hollowed logs of men who slept in caves with a fire to keep at bay the night. And Mankind will be on the outward road, exploring like a child set free in a toyshop.

Alone?

He glanced at Alva and Fin-Dahma, and wondered.

Overhead the sun dimmed slightly as one moon crept across its edge to cause a partial eclipse. Baking desert softened its shadows, and the heat eased its withering burn on the land. Even without adjusting the temperature controls in his clothing he felt cooler. He surveyed the parched sand, and his body yearned for the breeze that rustled the sycamore leaves in his garden.

On whatever worlds we find, he mused, we'll add to the brotherhood we're starting here, until something vaster gathers us into itself. The Martians gave us a trust to keep, and keep it we must—both for ourselves and for others . . .

Crewmen relaxing near the ship regarded the aliens with undisguised curiosity. Fin-Dahma sensed it and snapped, "I wish your people would not stare at me, Seafarmer."

"Yours stare at me," he retorted. "And I assure you that you look as frightful to my race as I look to yours—or hadn't you considered that possibility? But, of course, we've had lots of experience that gave us a bit of wisdom, and we're too adult to judge people by their physical appearance."

As he had intended, the comment stung.

Fin-Dahma rapidly changed the subject. "Where are we going?"

"To see beyond the barrier—the one your spy spent so many entertaining hours walking round and throwing rocks at and trying to undermine."

With anger and shocked guilt, Fin-Dahma demanded, "Is *anything* hidden from you?"

"A little, but not much," said Seafarmer, smiling amiably.

He kept the drifter at low height and speed, not wishing to scare his passengers too much: they showed evident unease, in a hull that seemed as insubstantial as a bubble that might burst on touching any of the boulders it skimmed. Despite his previous flight, Alva sat hunched tensely in his seat, unwinking eyes watching each approaching dune or rock; Fin-Dahma fidgeted nervously, gripping the seat rails with pale-knuckled fingers.

"Don't worry," assured Seafarmer. "You can't fall."

The ground dropped sickeningly into a canyon carved by long-gone water. Alva peered dizzily into the abyss. Fin-Dahma forced his eyes to focus only on the opposite edge that seemed unreachably distant.

Seafarmer recalled the worn sketchbook handed through generations of his family with the diaries of an ancestor who had roamed the Earth, painting as he went. This enormous cleft resembled one view of the Grand Canyon, rock strata bared like the wound in a book ripped in half, the edge of each page holding a fossilised fragment of history. In its dimension and austerity the scene was magnificent ; and yet, with time, it might attain a different majesty, that of the ancient Norwegian fjords, rich-wooded slopes rising from the water, great shoulders of greenery marching silently into distances warm with blue mist.

"What does this resemble ?" he asked quietly, indicating the approaching edge and the further wilderness.

Neither alien answered.

"I imagine different colours," he prompted. "Red, brown . . ."

"Of course," said Alva softly. "Those pictures—the dead world reached by your ancestors . . ."

Fin-Dahma's gaze explored the chasm, where rock had long forgotten the river that sculpted its passage through the land.

"Your air will last a long time, but soon the crop and water situation will become serious. Within ten centuries, this world may be as dead as the one I showed you."

He spoke as if this period were a blink on the eyes of time.

Land moved beneath, only to drop away as the drifter again crossed the twining gorge. Ruefully Fin-Dahma recalled the tortuous walk made by his spy to cover this distance.

Sand rose to meet the hull. The three of them stepped out and straightened and stretched their limbs while the Talker hung glittering beside them. Seafarmer led the way, following a fresh path among rocks and dunes. Suddenly the path opened on to a small plain where no plain had been before.

"Well ?" asked Seafarmer. He felt the gladness, warm satisfaction and somehow the poignancy of a parent watching his child unwrap a birthday present.

Fin-Dahma stood as if hypnotised. Alva began to exclaim something, but stopped, and stared in curiosity that became hushed wonder.

The partial eclipse had ended, and rocks baked again in the seared desolation. Far ahead reared peaks, jagged and sheer and white in a blast of light and heat. But in the foreground was a clearing, a green clearing.

The small plain glowed with vegetation—fruit trees and grasses that should grow sparsely, in jealously tended orchards banking the last rivers—not wildly, luxuriantly, in the scorch of the uplands.

Moisture misted the scene, hanging in rainbow hues above thirsty leaves.

Seafarmer led them into the orchard. Here the sand was different, transformed into a magic soil that fed the greed of the roots. All around, from laden branches, hung fat ripe fruit; leaves revelled in the sunmade warmth and manmade mist, not wrinkled or parched, but juicily, ecstatically green.

"Here," said Seafarmer, plucking a fruit and handing it to Fin-Dahma. The Ruler weighed it in a disbelieving palm, peeled it dreamily, then bit carefully and mashed the fruit between great flat teeth with increasing satisfaction. He looked down at the thick soft peel on the ground.

"How . . .?" he asked humbly.

Seafarmer shrugged. "Show us the most barren bit of your planet, and in time we'll make it flower with whatever fruits you choose."

Surveying the garden with envious eyes, Alva thought of the scraps of orchard that had made his people prepare for war. It seemed ridiculous now.

Seafarmer must have guessed his thoughts. He waved one gloved hand over the scene and said, "Do you still think that weapons are worth more than brains?"

"But—the water," protested Fin-Dahma suddenly. "Where did it come from?"

"We used seawater, refined, and stored in a reservoir beyond the orchard. Actually, your world needs at least another sea. There's a convenient site for it—a depressed area to the west."

"You can provide a sea?"

"Lots of water lies waste on other planets in this system. Give us a free hand, enough time, and there'll be new seas, clouds to shield the sun and provide rain, and fertile land instead of desert."

In savage intensity Fin-Dahma grasped Seafarmer's armoured elbow and demanded, "Tell me *why* you offer all this."

"We wish to help—it's as simple as that."

Bluntly he said, "I don't believe you : I can't believe you. The task will be enormous, and I'm afraid to imagine the payment you'll demand."

"All that we ask—not demand—is friendship."

"It sounds incredibly naive."

"You must believe me if your world is to survive."

Bitterly Fin-Dahma said, "You have us trapped."

"No—we found you trapped, and wish to free you."

With tormented brown eyes Fin-Dahma stared into the black face of this creature that had fallen from the stars and offered such temptation. There was a long hush. His fingers still held the arm as though trying to crush it and wring truth from it.

At last he asked, "Can I bring my people to see this?"

"Yes. The barrier's gone. We installed that because we're artists and we're cautious—we don't like the public to see our work until we're satisfied with it. The water supply should last about thirty days—after which it will be renewed at your request. This is yours, now."

Fin-Dahma released Seafarmer's arm and turned slowly.

"I'll go and tell the council," he said, and walked off.

"Wait," called Seafarmer. "I'll take you back."

Fin-Dahma looked round. "I'll walk," he said. "I know the way, and I need time to think."

"But it'll take you hours," protested Seafarmer.

"I shall go alone," said Fin-Dahma. He walked on, forcing the stoop from his spine, picking his way among the rocks, a glint of blue in the starkness.

Seafarmer watched until he had gone from sight.

Alva stood deep in thought.

After a while Seafarmer smiled and said, "He's a very suspicious old man, and a very proud old man."

"And a good man," added Alva.

Seafarmer regarded him questioningly.

"I can forgive his treatment of me, although I can never forget it—and I understand his desire to exterminate my race." Biting shame tinted the voice. "How could I do otherwise, when my people planned to make war on the South? But he does what he thinks best for his people, and I respect his sincerity."

"Well, I hope he makes the right decision."

"If it is the right decision," retorted Alva.

"You don't trust us either, Alva?"

"Your offers are too tempting, Seafarmer. We have folktales of men who were tempted by spirits and lost more than ever they gained—they sacrificed independence for comfort, becoming slaves, not masters."

"In our plans there'll be no slaves and no masters, Alva. Merely mutual respect and assistance. My people were given a task."

"Task?"

"One day you'll understand. Meanwhile you must trust us."

Scrabbling commotion, the mindless ullulation of agony and fear, made them turn with thudding pulses. Something angular struggled up from the dunes in a clatter of red wings, talons meeting through its writhing mewing prey, to flap heavily over the hills with one harsh triumphant scream that rang among the cliffs.

Seafarmer watched while the prey curled and cried in the air.

"You must consider this a cruel world," ventured Alva.

"Not at all—we're used to birds of prey, and animals that murder each other. We're only horrified when we find thinking creatures that do the same."

The comment might have seared like hot iron but for his casual tones: even so, Alva glanced at him with sudden dislike.

Seafarmer leaned on a boulder that would have blistered his bare skin, and looked pensively across arid valleys where rocks protruded like neglected gravestones.

"Last night, Alva, I stood for hours watching your moons rising and setting above those peaks. For all its hostility to life, yours is somehow a beautiful world, and we could make it even more beautiful."

And the ugly thought sprang: "For us—or for you?"

The idea coiled in Alva's mind like a thin venomous snake.

Easily, relaxedly, Seafarmer straightened and swung his arms.

"Let's go," he suggested. "There's a lot to do."

With the Talker following like a dog, he walked back to the drifter. Alva walked behind, the snake twining in his brain. He could hear from the distance a hissing as mist sprayed over the fruit.

"During the past four days," said the council spokesman, "you have seen the orchard. It shows every sign of fulfilling Seafarmer's promises. If the water supply is maintained, those fruit will flourish more than any we have ever seen."

One habitual pessimist said, "Perhaps they'll gain our trust, then cut down the water supplies all over our world when we have become dependent on them—and force us into submission."

In one corner the Military Adviser sat worrying.

Guards sprang upright, swinging and slapping their guns, as Fin-Dahma walked slowly into the hall. He looked at the council.

"I have spoken with Seafarmer," he announced. "He will come tonight."

Eagerly the Military Adviser rose and stepped forward and asked, "Have I permission to make my test, Fin-Dahma?"

The Ruler considered soberly and, at last, reluctantly, said: "Yes—but only upon my signal."

The council argued together. A night-beetle, the one that had scared Fin-Dahma previously, droned lazily about the hall. A bored guard tried to swat it with his rifle butt. With insolent ease the green thing hopped in mid-air over swishing metal and soared amid the carvings high above the doorway, a burning emerald in shadows, twinkling its jewelled eyes upon the debating council; and within its plastic body glowed organs that would have mystified the guard, had he succeeded in smashing the prowler. Miles away across moonlit desert, in the *Starbird*, Rivermaker watched and listened thoughtfully at a panel.

## Chapter Five

Seafarmer's drifter fell like a petal from the evening to the silent street. He stepped out with Alva and the purring Talker. Guards stood rigidly before the tall doorway of the council hall. Fin-Dahma stepped brusquely forward, welcomed him in cool tones, and turned to lead him into the hall; Alva followed, feeling the hate of the Southerners lapping coldly upon him, like a man walking deliberately into the sea. The hall was gloomy and crowded. Blue-grey faces, hundreds of them, with eyes flashing in the flare of high torches, studied Seafarmer's motion as he ascended the steps to the dais and stood facing them. With the ease of an insect the Talker rose to land beside him. Amid hostile comment Alva mounted the steps and stood in one corner, looking down quietly and keeping the stump behind his back, hating public appearance but trying to conquer his feelings.

Fin-Dahma moved by Seafarmer and called for silence and was evidently about to make a pompous introduction.

"Well?" said Seafarmer casually. "Have you decided?"

He felt as though unarmed in a lion cage, and his lapse from protocol had evidently annoyed the crowd; but, knowing the trouble that was simmering, he saw no sense in delaying a showdown.

Recovering, Fin-Dahma said, "No—and, perhaps, yes."

"You wish my people to help yours, then?"

"Of course. But we cannot trust you, Seafarmer."

"You must."

"How can we? Perhaps you intend to enslave us."

Seafarmer uttered a lengthy, sarcastic, exaggerated sigh which the Talker adroitly turned into the local equivalent.

"Why should we do anything so stupid? We can construct machines that need no food or sleep, and work more efficiently than anything made from feeble flesh and bone."

The hostility in the hall was thickening; he could sense it.

"And why should we want your world?" he asked patiently.

"Your air would choke us: your fruit would poison us—the sun would burn us and your nights would freeze us."

A councillor rose to suggest craftily: "But if you can alter the world for us, you might alter it for yourselves."

The crowd obviously appreciated this point.

Seafarmer paused, then, with polite contempt that stung like nettles, slowly and quietly asked, "Then why did we bother to negotiate at all? Why didn't we destroy you in two days, as I said we could? If we meant harm we could inflict it in five hundred ways, none of them involving elaborate deception."

Now the audience listened tensely.

"But what do you gain by helping us?" demanded the councillor bewilderedly.

"Brotherhood, whatever the shape or colour of the body. Together, in friendship, our races could achieve greatness denied to a race alone."

"Your ideas are strange," said the councillor. "You display a childish innocence towards the harsh facts of life."

Softly but intently, Seafarmer said, "We have learned from harsher facts than ever your people will dream of—and we wish to spare you from them."

The councillor sat down again, nonplussed.

"What will you do," asked Fin-Dahma, "if we decline your offers?"



"Ask the Northerners—as we shall anyway. If they accept, we'll gladly help them : if they decline, we'll leave, and return after fifty years to ask again—we have plenty of time, but your world has little, and each delay will make the task harder for all of us."

Into the hush Fin-Dahma enquired, "And what if we drove you from our land and refused to let you return?"

This, thought Seafarmer, is where the entertainment begins.

"Can you do it?" he asked blandly.

Fin-Dahma regarded him carefully. "Don't underestimate us," he warned. "Your destruction of the rock was impressive but our weapons could destroy you just as effectively."

A sea of eyes shone, widely, in the flare of torches. Seafarmer noticed that the number of armed guards at the main doorway had unobtrusively doubled.

Mockingly, a parent teasing his threatening infant, he asked, "You think that your weapons could hurt me?" There was enough suggestion of derision in his voice to madden some of the listeners.

"Perhaps not," admitted the Ruler. "But we prefer death in war to life in slavery."

"Forget the idea of slavery," said Seafarmer in exasperated scorn. "We want to share with you, not control you. And you can forget the idea of harming me—nothing you possess could do that."

"You are challenging us?" asked Fin-Dahma gently.

The hush deepened.

"Yes."

Fin-Dahma signalled with one hand. The guards stood alertly, backs braced against the doors. Weapons rose, covering Seafarmer from every angle. The Military Adviser stalked with an arrogance he did not quite feel, from his position on the dais and levelled a rifle at Seafarmer from a distance of perhaps thirteen feet.

Seafarmer's throat was drying tightly. Mildly he looked up at the Adviser and remarked, "I didn't think that your children grew so tall."

Angry eyes fixed their gaze on his above the rifle sights. Torchlight flared along the barrel, flashing in warm coppery hues. The black hole of the barrel faced his chest. Coldly, perspiration trickled on his flesh, clotting in the hair under his armpits, and his pulse was accelerating steadily. He tried to stare out the Adviser, but was forced to blink when his eyes

burned. The Adviser lowered parchment lids in supercilious minor triumph.

"If you survive," said Fin-Dahma, "then you spoke truly of your power, and it would be hopeless to fight you. And if you mean us no harm you will bear us no grudge for this test. But if you die we shall know that you lied, and that perhaps you lied about other matters. And whether you live or die, we shall perhaps learn the true feelings of your people from the results of this test."

Seafarmer prayed that nothing would go wrong. He shifted his legs slightly within his clothing, fighting to preserve his air of nonchalance. The situation was nasty.

"Why talk?" he asked levelly. "Or are you afraid to shoot?"

Behind him the councillors had cleared a space, edging to either side in fear of ricochette or spectacular vengeance.

In mingled determination and apprehension the Military Adviser stared along the sights: he breathed sharply through narrowed lips, making the hairy strands from his nostrils waver delicately, rhythmically. The rifle shifted a fraction of an inch. Seafarmer could see slate-blue fingers tensing around the firing device.

He forced himself to stand smiling at the black hole from which the bullet would come. Utter silence stretched in the air.

And something green leapt amid the blue—Alva sprang in front of him, blocking the Adviser's view, and in either shock or reflex action the Adviser fired.

In the hall the explosion was deafening. The flash lit far corners redly. Alva reeled, one palm and his instinctively lifted stump pressed over his face. With gaping mouth Fin-Dahma stood, left hand half raised in a signal that would never be completed.

Seafarmer stood with heart lurching strickenly. *You fool, Alva—you glorious utter idiot!*

One communal exhalation sighed in the air: then the hall became absolutely silent.

Sweat was drenching Seafarmer's face and body. His heart now thudded at sickening speed, as though hammering its way out through his rib cage. And then, slowly, relief melted the ice in his limbs. With an almost agonising effort he made himself relax and stand smiling, with folded arms.

Dazedly, Alva uncovered his eyes. Around him shimmered a grey mist. Within this mist, inches from his chest, hung the

bullet, burning like a hot coal, redly, in the dimness. Every eye studied the bullet, watching while it drifted with uncanny slowness to land on the stone dais and cool into a little shapeless blob of metal. Alva lowered his arm and his stump, and stood swaying as the mist faded from around him.

Seafarmer let none of his enervating relief show. Gently, into the petrified silence, he explained, "We protect ourselves." His words broke the air separately, as shocking as the leap of three fish in night water. "And also we protect others. If this Northerner had fired at one of you, the same would have happened. Melt your guns and make farming implements with the metal. We have an old saying concerning the beating of swords into ploughshares when the time of peace comes. I think the time of peace has come."

Fin-Dahma looked at the blob of metal by Alva's feet. The Military Adviser's rifle hung limply at his side: he stood like a man struck blind.

"And we have another saying, concerning the greatest love of all—that which makes a man willing to die if his death save another. The concept may be strange to you."

At last Fin-Dahma found words. With subdued but oddly dignified tones he said, "Any man would lay down his life for a member of his family."

"To us, all thinking creatures are a family. Remember that, and think about it later in the night when we have gone."

No one spoke.

Alva bent to pick up the bullet, plucking it from where it had stuck to the stone, and felt its lingering warmth with dry thin fingers.

"And if you cherish further thoughts of power," said Seafarmer, "follow me and watch."

He descended the stairs and walked through the parting crowd. The guards fumbled in their eagerness to open the doors. He strode out into the night and led an apprehensive following down the road until he reached an open square. He halted and faced the peaks that rose like titans' fangs into the sky. Stars sparkled coldly, and one moon was a thin crescent above the peaks, stooped like an old man hunching his back against the freezing wind.

Wordlessly he pointed at the third peak.

It glowed ruddily, then hotly, whitely, blinding the watchers; and a shield of nothingness grew from the air, dimming

whatever furies worked amid the mountains : the audience might have been squinting into a furnace through smoke glass. The desert trembled and thunder sounded while energies gripped the rock like a potter's hands on clay. Blue light stabbed skyward, a beam probing the stars, creating shadows that danced across the sand and crouched behind the dunes. All around Seafarmer, hands shaded wide eyes. His filters clicked rapidly. Then, with dizzying abruptness, the beam vanished ; distorted night fell with silent concussion on the watchers, and the shield had gone, and palely the moon hung hunched in settling skies.

Searing wind and a collective moan of fear spread into the frost. On Fin-Dahma's thin shoulders pressed the weights of age and despair.

"I shall return in ten days after consultations with the Northerners," announced Seafarmer. He walked to his drifter and clambered into it, making room for Alva and the Talker. The frail bubble curved into the air and wafted towards the hills. Soon afterwards, the starship itself rose soundlessly and fled like another moon towards the north. The vessel didn't climb to fly over the mountain range : it slid swiftly through a gap, where the third peak had become a low plateau that still burned redly. In warm musty wind that blew across the freezing night, Fin-Dahma and his people stood watching, long after the *Starbird* had gone.

When the mountains were behind the ship, Gulfcrosser relaxed and grinned at Smith. "Never again do I want to judge anything as closely as I did back there," he commented, chuckling wryly. "When old Alva tried to sabotage things, I had less than a split instant to adjust focus—it gave me grey hair."

"Talking of grey hair, did you see the Chief when he got back ? He was shaking with reaction—all the same, I have a sneaking suspicion that he wouldn't have missed it for anything."

Banteringly Seafarmer said, "Well, Alva, you're on the best road of all, now—the one that leads home."

Alva didn't answer : the words hurt, reminding him of the ordeal ahead when his people saw him. After a while he looked at a screen where the sea rolled its waves through darkness, glimmering vaguely in the glow of one small moon.

"It seems impossible that I regarded my voyage southward as such a daring achievement—you must think I'm naive, Seafarmer."

"No . . . There has to be a first step, and it's usually the hardest, small though it seems later. First explore your valley, and the next valley—climb the mountains, cross the rivers, find out what lies beyond and beneath your sea : then reach your moons, your planets, and finally your neighbour stars. But that's still merely a first step—all that changes is the scale."

He gestured at another screen which showed the sky.

"Look at those stars, Alva. Somewhere out there, others must be exploring, and they'll meet my descendants. And, to my descendants at that meeting, this journey from my world to yours will seem as ludicrous as the crossing of a river by a gang of savages on a raft. And when that meeting takes place, Alva, I hope that your descendants, and Fin-Dahna's, will be there with mine."

Alva sat silently, staring into the hoarfrost of suns, and somewhere in secret darkness within him was kindled the first spark of the mystic fire that drove Seafarmer's people.

Abruptly, the man asked, "Why did you jump in front of me?"

"To protect you," replied Alva, blinking in lazy motion.

"I thought you mistrusted me. Why bother protecting me?"

"I did mistrust you—until you spoke in that hall. Then I became convinced that you were sincere and honest, even though I'm still dubious about the effects your visit may have on my race."

"You're not convinced that our arrival's a blessing, then?"

"No, not entirely. But I am convinced that you mean well."

"So you tried to stop a bullet that was aimed at me."

"Anyone would do that for a . . . a . . ." He sought words.

"For a revolting black animal born on some distant planet?"

Alva looked into darkness where the waves rolled.

"I think I forgot that," he admitted simply.

*There has to be a first step, and it's usually the hardest, small though it seems later.*

"Thank you," said Seafarmer quietly. "My journey to your world has been justified."

He gazed through galactic shoals, with a deep and wonderful warmth, a sense of companionship and achievement, creeping in his veins. Alva had taken his first step, and to Seafarmer it would never seem small. He watched the eternal burning of suns, without speaking, and silently the starship drifted high over the ocean to the north.

## Chapter Six

An orange creature like a lizard scuttled past Seafarmer's boots to slide down a crack in the flat rock. His shadow lay hard and purple beside him. The red fabric of his clothing flared in sunlight, and metal parts flashed bitterly.

A mile away, the city shimmered in a haze of heat.

Alva, two feet taller than him, resembled a member of some antique religious order, his glossily domed head protruding on a slender neck from the grey gown of the Sick. The garment, a mere square of cloth-like material with a hole through which his head emerged, hung shapelessly to the rock at his feet.

The escort marched up the path, halted, and saluted with a swish of swords.

"Once more the people will hear you," said the spokesman. His vaguely reluctant, disapproving tone suggested that the decision came after long and arduous debate. His eyes flicked towards Alva, and in cold satisfaction he added, "I see that this time the cripple is not parading his injuries before us."

Alva made no reply. His icy silence was answer enough, together with a stare that disconcerted the spokesman.

"Shall we go, gentlemen?" suggested Seafarmer.

Pompously the escort about-turned and strode forward, sheathed swords held vertically. Alva loped lithely within the flapping cloth. Seafarmer had to step briskly, and he suspected that the escort knew this; but he resolved to drop dead from exhaustion before he would satisfy them by requesting a slower pace. He envied the Talker for the effortless way it drifted alongside, purring to itself.

Since his previous meetings with the Northerners, he had seen seven nights, and this land was in the same plight as the South. Sizzling heat ebbed into the insatiable moonlight; crops closed themselves tightly, like old men round a dying fire, hugging and storing its warmth against the long aching cold, while pools that once were lakes formed ice and frost that melted silently at dawn. And then with the day the great burning began again.

We have to move fast here, he thought—there's not a lot of time to waste . . .

The Court was a low structure of stone and timber, more elaborately carved than any of the southern buildings. Before wide doors stood ranks of soldiers whose unsheathed blades

glittered in the sun. The crowds around the entrance divided : the escort led the guests into welcome coolness where decorated beams and garish drapes glowed in smoky torchlight. Alva remained just inside the doorway, conscious of the damning cloth he had been ordered to wear, and avoiding the half-guilty glances of his former friends outside to save mutual embarrassment. Seafarmer followed the escort down the central steps and took his allotted place, looking over the long curved table at rows of seats, and blessing the tactful genius who had thought of raising his chair. The nine Inheritors sat on either side of him ; the public filed in slowly to fill their places, staring down at him like students in an ancient lecture-theatre awaiting miraculous displays from the chemistry tutor. The Elected took his stance behind a rostrum, high on the left, and declared the meeting open.

Seafarmer rested his gloved hands on the table. Fingers absently stroking the polished red wood, he stared up into hundreds of questing faces.

"Has a decision been made ?" he asked simply.

The Elected signalled briefly.

A guard entered from a door on the right and put a basket of fruit on the table—large, ripe fruit, rousing the appetite of the audience, and which the guard was reluctant to leave.

Grudgingly the Elected said, "These fruit are richer than any seen before—but perhaps they are the normal fruit of the Southland, brought here by you and planted in the orchard you gave us."

They'd argue till Doomsday, thought Seafarmer wearily.

Concealing his exasperation, he said, "Accept my word, and Alva's word, and the word of the Southerners—when you meet them—that *we* grew them."

Implacably the Elected retorted, "You are strangers ; Alva is a cripple under your inexplicable protection ; the Southerners are enemies. Who shall we believe ?"

"You'll have to believe all of us—and if the Southerners accept our aid, you won't dare refuse it."

"Perhaps," conceded the Elected dourly. Again he signalled.

The guard returned, setting down some of the implements forged in the *Starbird's* metalwork shops.

"Well ?"

Frankly the Elected said, "These tools are infinitely more efficient and durable than any we can make."

"You can have as many such tools as you require."

Almost desperately, the Elected demanded, "But what can we offer in exchange?"

"Friendship. How many times must I tell you?"

The Elected hesitated, rubbing creased eyelids with a hard knuckle. Then he signalled again. This time, with an air of reverence, the guard laid down the charts drawn up by the ship's technical staff.

"After intensive study," said the Elected, "our engineers pronounced your plans feasible."

How nice of them, thought Seafarmer, managing not to smile.

"The refining engine has been tested thoroughly and is quite efficient," added the Elected. "And if larger versions of the pumping machine in the orchard can be built, an irrigation project could commence immediately upon completion of a network of canals and trenches."

Seafarmer gave the audience a moment to absorb this, and said, "The plans are yours—and we'll give whatever advice or technical assistance is required for their implementation. More ships must come from my world, bringing machinery and technicians to help in the work."

The words caused sudden unease in the audience.

"We fear," said the Elected, "that you plan to dominate us."

"Not dominate—protect. Protect you from yourselves and from the Southerners, and protect the Southerners from themselves and from you."

In the hesitation, eyes moved around from the man to the plans, the implements and fruit, the Talker that squatted like a bronze idol on the table, and more furtively to the main doorway at the back of the Court where Alva stood in grey silence between the groups of guards.

Someone rose near the rear seats. His neighbours hurriedly made room for him to pass. He walked carefully down the central steps, holding aloft a carved staff.

*Here he comes,* thought Seafarmer. *The local witch-doctor, complete with portable totem pole.*

Through tight dry skin the man's bones were traceable, thin in his scrawny limbs, ugly and knobby at the joints. His eyes stared like an owl's in a shrunken, darkly green face, and the



white strands straggling from his nostrils, yellowy at their roots, lent him the air of a bearded Biblical figure ; he reached the table, forced most of the stoop from his stance, and looked down at Seafarmer sharply.

"I am charged with the welfare of the people," he announced grandly. "I wish to know if you hold intentions of perverting the people from the customary laws and ways."

Coolly Seafarmer lifted his gaze from curving prominent ribs to the Guardian's dark eyes.

"Not perverting," he said bluntly. "Again, *protecting*."

The hush deepened. The Guardian swayed comfortably, regarding him contemptuously from behind the upheld staff.

With admirable restraint and politeness he requested, "Kindly explain your remark."

"Recently your race believed that the world was flat."

"That belief was abandoned three centuries ago," protested the Elected from his rostrum.

Seafarmer's eyes never left those of the Guardian. "Three centuries? That's little, to my race, and we're only reaching adulthood. Your people are stumbling infants, still trapped in the misguided superstitions of your ancestors." Into the angry stillness he added condescendingly, "Once, about a thousand years ago, my people were like yours—still making war, shunning the sick, and burning those who dared question old beliefs."

"Heretics must be silenced," insisted the Guardian.

"And is it right to banish the sick?"

"Yes."

"*Why?*" demanded the man in a voice that made the Inheritors flinch. They watched him, exchanging sidelong worried glances.

Slowly, as though explaining simplicities to an idiot, the stooped Guardian said, "We love beauty, in art and in our bodies : therefore we keep from sight those deformed beyond the natural infirmities of age. And the diseased may spread their diseases. Thus we protect the people by sending the ill or deformed to the Outland."

His voice held unmistakable distaste. Seafarmer smiled thinly, recalling Alva's reluctance to meet his own people, and their revulsion at sight of him.

In a stinging whisper of scorn, he said, "Your poverty is tragic, but your mental poverty is frightening. Are you mad? You

lack crops, so you plan war instead of cultivation. You're ignorant of healing—so you make the sick into pariahs and then conveniently forget them. And you let them come here once a year clad in cloth that hides their afflictions, while you bless them in the square and invoke gods you no longer believe in to help them. Oh, you people have a magnificent ability to pretend that the unseen is the unreal. Can you do nothing sanely?"

The audience moved, stirring in restless anger, every eye fixed on his red clothing that clashed with the green of flesh.

He slid deliberately from his chair and leaned on the high table and pointed at the third Inheritor on his left. "He shows the first signs of the parasite on his face. If those bites and sores remain untreated, the flesh will inflame then rot and peel off in fragments—then will you forget that you ever listened to his judgment?"

The Inheritor lowered his eyes and placed a trembling hand over the bites on his face. His neighbours edged from him slightly: Seafarmer watched with a mocking chuckle.

"Yesterday," he said casually, "I visited the Outland."

Almost he laughed aloud at the crowd's consternation. The men and women sat shocked and frightened, and the Inheritors stared at him like birds caught by the eyes of a snake. Across the table from him, the Guardian stepped back with instinctive dread of infection, almost dropping his staff. Before a riot or panic could erupt, Seafarmer continued in biting anger that gripped the attention of everyone in the Court.

"What I saw convinced me that you lack the rudiments of civilisation. Formerly respected people rot there, scraping at their sores with one hand and at their crops with the other. Why haven't you the mere humanity to help them instead of hiding them?"

The Guardian stood shaking, seeking words, with the staff clutched in bloodless fingers.

Hoarsely, almost angrily, the Elected asked, "But what can we do?"

"Smash down the wall, recall the guards, and bring those sufferers back to the city."

"We can never—" began one of the Inheritors.

Seafarmer gave him a white-eyed look that silenced him. "Train some people to look after them and let them be members of a physically and mentally healthier community."

He pointed at Alva with suddenness that made even Alva start.

The crowd swivelled their heads. Alva stepped involuntarily back into the doorway recess, among guards who moved from him.

"He sailed alone, southward, risking his life to give you knowledge of the world you live in—and was it his fault that the Southerners are as barbaric as you? Did he ask them to torture and maim him? Must he be punished for that?"

The eyes moved unceasingly. No one answered. Alva stood staring down at the stone floor.

"Well? Are you sending him to the Outland?"

"Where else?" asked the Guardian, recovering his powers of speech. "We cannot cure him—we are not gods."

"Nor are we," answered Seafarmer gently. "But we aren't callous animals such as you appear to be."

The Guardian's hand quivered in fury. Almost he tried to strike Seafarmer before the horrified crowd.

"Your belief must be changed," declared Seafarmer. "And perhaps this can be done when you see that cures are physically possible."

The Elected descended from his rostrum and walked to the small man and stared down into his helmet at the chubby black face. "You say that you can make the desert live again," he said. "But how can you cure a ruined body?"

"It can be done," replied Seafarmer with simple dignity.

A few laughed caustically; the majority listened in sceptical silence.

"On arriving in the North," said Seafarmer, "specialists in our ship made a study of Alva's wounds and flesh. We can perform what would once have been regarded as miracles of healing on our bodies—and the specialists claim that they can do the same with yours. Will you allow us seven days to prove this claim, using Alva as a demonstration?"

The Elected gazed at Seafarmer and then at the listening Alva, and, at last, quietly, said, "You may have seven days to show us your powers, Seafarmer. Then perhaps we can consider accepting your assistance."

"On behalf of the specialists I accept the challenge."

"Then let this meeting end," said the Elected. "And, after seven days, we shall—"

"Wait," said Seafarmer softly.

The crowd sat stunned : to interrupt the Elected was almost unthinkable.

"Yes?" asked the Elected slowly.

"How many days have passed since we last met here?"

The Elected thought briefly and then said, "Seven."

Seafarmer straightened and stepped back from the table. He smiled, revealing a glitter of white teeth, and realised for the first time that he was achingly tensed and perspiring.

*Have the courage to do it, Alva*, his mind pleaded almost in prayer. He beckoned.

The guards stood speechlessly as Alva strode forward and began descending the central steps. People nearest the aisle pressed back in dread. Scandalised cries rose. With an outraged harsh shout the Guardian stalked stiffly up the steps, holding his staff horizontally. Alva lunged and shoved him aside. Caught off balance, the Guardian fell among the seats, his staff rolling on the steps. Reaching the table, staring defiantly at the dumbfounded Inheritors, Alva began fumbling within his grey robe. As Seafarmer grinned in pure delight, Alva lifted the cloth over his head. Torchlight glistened on green flesh. He bundled up the robe and threw it on the floor, and rested his hands on his chest and turned slowly from the Inheritors to the audience.

"Where are the burns?" asked Seafarmer gently. "Where are the cuts? Where's the hacked stump? Are you sending Alva to the Outland?"

The silence was very, very long.

Then the Elected walked round the table, quelling his horror, and took hold of Alva's hands and lifted them before his eyes and studied them. Alva winced slightly at the touch of sharp nails on his new hand.

"The skin is still sensitive," explained Seafarmer. "And the bonework is relatively soft—but in twenty days that hand will be as perfect as the original one."

The Inheritor with the sores on his face stood in a half trance.

"My elder son," whispered the Elected. "He duelled, against my orders, and lost a hand—I had to send him to the Outland."

"Bring him back," said Seafarmer. "Perhaps we can cure him also."

The Elected looked down at him with an agony in his eyes that even Seafarmer could recognise. "He died a year ago. The guards heard of it, and told me."

Sympathetically the man said, "But that need never happen again. In future, surely we can heal and not condemn?"

The Elected stared at Alva's hands.

"Tomorrow," said Seafarmer, "I wish to hold a conference with the Southerners. Will you attend?"

After a pause, the Elected said, "Yes—I think we may have much to discuss."

"The details can be arranged this afternoon," said the man.

Half way up the stairs, the dazed Guardian was half sitting and half lying on the stone. Seafarmer walked up to him and helped him to his feet and handed him the staff. "There's a lot of healing to be done, he said. "I hope that you'll help us—and in future years perhaps this staff may become the sign of the healers on this world. Will you work with us for your people?"

Holding the staff in a shivering hand, the Guardian looked down incredulously at him. "*I can help you?*" he asked feebly.

"Yes, if you will. We shall need you. This also can be discussed at length in the afternoon.

He nodded and walked on up the steps with the Talker gliding after him, and Alva striding beside him with an air of self-assuredness that astonished his friends. In the Court was utter silence as the three of them left.

## Chapter Seven

The sun was a white flare in the white sky, casting strips of light from truncated columns across the burning sand. Fallen pillars lay like great logs eaten by the rot of time. Seats and tables with still identifiable carvings rose from the dunes, driftwood in a frozen sea. Walls stood upright, or leaned on banks of dust, and patchy mosaics made red and green and blue fire in the shadows. And, in the mosaics, blue and green people worked or sported together.

Already, wind was brushing a layer of grains over the courtyard that had been cleared for the meeting.

Alva and his Elected sat on hot stone seats, facing Fin-Dahma and the Military Adviser. Alva rested his new hand on the table, letting the Southerners see how the flesh was hardening and the nails were growing, enjoying the way their

eyes roved his body seeking the brands and scars that the starmen had healed.

Seafarmer sat at one end of the table.

Suddenly some invisible ceiling dimmed the sunlight, providing pleasant shade.

The aliens looked more comfortable: the man began to speak.

"You can see from the mosaics that your ancestors lived in peace. Then a combination of war and natural disaster separated your people. We wish to prevent further hostilities or separations."

Alva looked down the valleys, over dunes and cruel rockery, to the green burst of the new orchard. The Military Adviser looked absently over Alva's head at the plateau which had been a mountain before Seafarmer's people had decapitated it.

"You remember the film I showed you of my ancestors reaching another world—in the deadness was a dark building, a tower. It was left as a legacy by the former inhabitants of that world; the Tower gave us a purpose, that of preaching peace wherever we travelled."

Around, the mountainsides blistered, and hot wind roamed.

For a moment, Seafarmer's eyes stared past the ruins into an agonising distance of time and space, and he smiled rather bleakly. "Perhaps that trust saved my people—it guided us, at a time when we most needed to be guided. So we have a debt to pay, which we can pay only by helping others."

He paused. No one spoke. Puffs of dust blew across their feet.

"We can give you crops and health—but war must cease. The force that removes a mountain must never be directed at a city, and the forges that produce implements of agriculture may never manufacture weapons. Is that too large a thing to ask?"

Then anger and sorrow filled his voice. "Your weapons are laughingly primitive—swords and rifles are feeble, but they're the first steps along the road to self-destruction. The tragedy is that it's already too late to save some worlds. All our knowledge cannot alter the past. Look."

He pressed something on his wrist. Blackness, speckled with stars, grew over the table, between the watchers.

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Harshly, Seafarmer said, "This is an example of what we are trying to prevent. You're looking at a world not far from mine. Its inhabitants lacked the sense to learn, and all the sciences known can't save them now."

The ruin spun slowly through darkness amid the fragments of a moon. Seas knelt lamenting on lifeless beaches. Areas were scarred, ugly like sores on a corpse. Windblown dust settled and drifted through crumbled cities, but no plants grew, and no animals moved in desolate lands or in the wisp of sky.

Alva and the others stared with pitying, shocked eyes.

"The planet is riddled with poisons that defy our finest protective equipment," said Seafarmer. "Men have died, in horrible ways, after attempting to explore too closely. Perhaps this sight can be a warning—now you see why war is a thing that must cease. The universe is large, and life is small and lonely—too precious to waste in madness like this."

Another instant the tomb hung in darkness with its inscription plain for all to read, and then the scene faded and the aliens faced only one another across the table.

Fin-Dahma said, "Your help might render hostilities unnecessary. And certainly we can't fight you, whatever your motives. On those grounds alone we might have to accept your offers."

"You have little choice," remarked Seafarmer, smiling. "But you aren't losing your freedom. We want your people to keep their independence, not follow us meekly."

"My race will not take kindly to the company of these green Northerners," said Fin-Dahma.

"Your colour is revolting to me," retorted the Elected.

Seafarmer chuckled. "You both look horrible to me—and obviously I look as horrible to you. But strangeness and prejudice will wear off with time."

Fin-Dahma stood up and strolled amid the ruins to halt, staring pensively down the valleys. Crouched under pitiless heat, his towns lay scattered in the waste. Here and there clung patches of sparse vegetation. In the foreground, the new orchard defied the sun and sand.

"In four days," announced Seafarmer, "my ship will return to my world. But some of my people will stay here to tend the orchards and set up buildings in which to live and make the tools you require—that is, if you agree to their remaining."



"Can we prevent this?" asked the Military Adviser drily.

"They remain only with your permission," repeated the man softly. "In a year, I'll return, and all decisions must be made by them. Meanwhile, I would like one member of each race to come with me to my world."

Four pairs of wide eyes never left his face.

"Perhaps, after seeing my world and meeting various experts who can give more specialised advice than I can, you will make a better decision."

Alva remembered how the stars had burned in the starship screen. A numbing thrill ran in his flesh.

He stood up, trembling. "I should like to go—if I am permitted."

"My task is with my people," said the Elected. "And I am too old for a long journey. I grant permission."

With amused scorn, Fin-Dahma said, "I am old, also—but such an adventure appeals to me. My Military Adviser and the Council can govern the people until I return."

Seafarmer smiled. Perhaps they're too simple to appreciate the dimensions of the trip they'll make, he thought—but I'll give them credit for their courage.

He rose and summoned the larger drifter. It came down from the hills to settle in the courtyard. "Let's leave," he said, "and prepare for the journey."

Four days later, from the peaks by the central sea, the *Starbird* moved quietly into the evening. As on its arrival, thousands of eyes watched it sliding past the moons; but now there was less superstitious terror, and rather a blend of understanding and wonder, and even hope. People watched from plains and hillsides while the globe became a disc, and the disc became a star burnished in sunlight that had long left the land; then the star spread green ripples and the ripples faded, and the moons alone shone whitely in the advancing cold. Transmuted by Gann-Shuva from sand to silver, the dunes lay silently, unaware that their days might be numbered.

*Humbling, wrote Alva, to see the world curving and shrinking till in one glance my eyes crossed the ocean that divides the land. Gann-Shuva, moving nearby, was no longer a shining disc but a great bulging landscape, pitted like the flesh of the sick. Then the last familiar thing fell behind us, and ahead lay the gulf between our world and Seafarmer's.*

*Former enemies in a ship crewed by strangers, plunging through darkness away from homes and people, Fin-Dahma and I felt the same year and loneliness. One final time we glimpsed the sun, a dwindling, reddening disc: the world and its moons were gone, and behind us the hues of the stars were dimming like drops of metal cooling from the forge. Fear, homesickness, isolation—all these afflict us—but the Southerner speaks little, and I can only hope that time narrows the distance between us.*

*Now we are in our separate quarters, preparing for a strange sleep which Seafarmer says will last a long time during the voyage to his world.*

In the observation room, Seafarmer sat watching the changing colour of stars while the auxiliary drive propelled the ship with mounting velocity through night. Home seemed very near now, and already he was remembering, as though from a few moments ago, the smell of his garden, and the blackbird that nested in the hedge each year; across a chasm of light-years he saw his pale blue house surrounded by banked patterns of flowers, and heard the song, and the flurry of feathered wings. Around him, the metal and plastics became prison-like and the screens of changing stars were barred windows.

But the deeps would call him back. A few weeks at home, parties with relatives and friends—then, one night, he'd find himself standing and staring skyward, tugged by the insidious invitation of the dark. So many times he had vowed to settle down, only to feel his eyes aching for strange suns and his feet itching for alien soil. Even in a crowd, he would be gripped by a sudden impatience, even a terrible loneliness.

"I'm a natural hermit or a born sailor," he mused, wryly. "And however crazy we sailors are, humanity needs a few of them . . ."

"There's nothing like isolation for promoting friendship," remarked Rivermaker. "Those two will soon grow to tolerate each other—it's the thin end of the wedge."

"Anyway," said Respighi, "by the time they get back they'll hardly recognise their own people—the team down there will have converted them to making ploughs instead of muskets."

"Let's settle and sleep," said Welder. "We're on the way now."

Glowing fierily in the *Starbird's* heart, the drive unit gently warped the fabric of space-time. Like a fish gliding from sunlit shallows into black deeps, borne on currents unseen, the ship slid down starless dimensions on the long voyage home.

*Scafarmer's world has air we cannot breathe and fruit we cannot eat yet we find it beautiful, a garden compared with ours. We landed on small mountains overlooking a sea. The mountains are rounder than ours, with greenery instead of seared beaches at their feet: even on higher slopes, vegetation thrives. And a stream cascades down to wind across the flatlands into the sea.*

*The name of the sea means "Tranquil" and certainly the scene is calm and fresh. The sun is cooler and smaller than ours, yellow instead of white, and perhaps without protective clothing we might feel uneasily cool, even in daylight: but the nights are as warm as the days, and his world seems a sheltered orchard, reminding me painfully of the deserts I have left.*

*But the main difference is a subtle one, in the air and land and ocean, architecture and engines and people—this world is a youth with life before him, while ours is a withered old man recalling vaguely his childhood. If Seafarmer's people could give my world a fraction of this youthful feeling, I would accept their help immediately—but I think I must accept it, anyway. Fin-Dahma is impressed but undecided: today we spoke with specialists in meteorology, agriculture, botany, irrigation and other sciences, all of whom had plans for the rebirth of our world, and their words were utterly convincing.*

*This evening it rained.*

*It rained!*

*We walked spellbound while around us the water fell, sluicing from generous skies, flashing in sunlight that shone through a gap in the enormous clouds. And the sunset, later, amid clearing skies, formed miracles of colour, alien, but unbelievably moving. I noted the fascinated longing with which Fin-Dahma stared, and I asked if he would like such scenes on our world—but he seemed incapable of speech, staring over the shining sea with eyes whose hunger could never be sated.*

One night, Alva was standing by the window of his quarters, watching the clouds roll beneath the stars, when

Fin-Dahma entered to stand beside him, following his moody gaze. The Ruler looked thoughtfully into the night, where graceful architecture shone its hues in darkness, and once more recalled his people grubbing for scant food in the baking wastes—then he visualised the slow return of rivers and seas, the conquest of desert by bright fresh orchards.

And, almost reluctantly, Fin-Dahma said, "I have decided to accept their help."

Alva's eyes showed his relief. "I'm convinced it will be beneficial," he said. "I trust them implicitly."

Fin-Dahma shrugged. "I'm old now, and won't live long, but I think my age has given me enough wisdom to choose rightly in this matter. I would prefer not to accept a helping hand from strangers, but necessity subdues my pride. Neither of us will see the new world—nor will our children, or their children: it will take perhaps twenty generations to make our world flourish, but it must be done."

Alva walked to the communicator and pressed a stud. After a moment Seafarmer's face stared questioningly from the screen.

"We've decided," said Alva simply. "We both accept."

Seafarmer smiled, long and widely, flashing white teeth between dark lips. "I'll come and see you," he said. "Dress for a little journey."

The flying machine sang its way over hidden prairies and woods to settle like a night-beetle on a tall building. The three of them, with the Talker, dismounted. Alva and Fin-Dahma paced the flat surface, glancing over a parapet into immense dark distance. Far below, occasional lights moved as vehicles hummed through the sleeping land. Above, clouds drifted in silent tatters.

Seafarmer swung his arms and stepped here and there, lithely, revelling in the native air that filled his lungs. Alva, watching, moving awkwardly in protective clothing, was appreciating for the first time how deeply the man must have yearned for home while far out amid the stars.

"I brought you here to see my favourite view," said Seafarmer. "I think you'll be quite impressed."

Alva mentioned something that had been rousing his curiosity. "Your name . . . Am I translating it too literally, or is there an implication which I don't understand?"

"Well, my ancestors obtained food from the seas," he explained. "And some of my crew have names derived from

ancestors who helped organise the landscapes or climates of the world centuries ago. You'll find that many of my people have trade names, handed down proudly through generations, even though they themselves don't follow the trade concerned. It's a quaint little custom that originated several centuries ago." He chuckled warmly. "Individually, we men are noisy little animals—but in numbers we became amateur planet shapers, bringing life where none might have been."

"I see," said Alva.

And the night greyed and the grey became pale blue, while the sun rose to ignite the colours of the world. Seafarmer's heart knew an immense thrill while the light came. On either side of him the aliens stood, watching the silent sheen of waterways and roads; the richening green of parks and woods, under straggling clouds that turned slowly from red to pink, and from pink to white. Fin-Dahma looked from dizzying height on to creeping ants that were vehicles speeding beneath.

He pointed. "What is that?"

Where six white roads met stood a great pedestal, dark blue, with the white design of two clasped hands.

"I remember when you landed and met my people—the man I sent to meet you — you gripped his hand in that fashion . . ."

"And the banner planted by your people on the dead planet," Alva. "It had the same picture . . ."

"It's a traditional sign of friendship — we eventually adopted it as our emblem," said Seafarmer.

Fin-Dahma looked about him at the thriving young land under the sun, and asked wistfully, "Can you ever make our world blossom like yours?"

"I think so," said Seafarmer, smiling quietly. "We've had a lot of practice. Alva, you mentioned the dead planet where my ancestors put their flag." He pointed down at the junction of the six roads. "That's where MacDunn's ship landed. And the pedestal stands where he planted the flag."

They looked at him in stricken disbelief.

"And we're standing on top of the tower you glimpsed," he added. "That alone remains of the world you saw in those films."

Alva stood staring wordlessly all round. Fin-Dahma gestured almost angrily at the view and said, "You turned those red deserts into . . . *this*?"

"After centuries of labour, yes."

Alva drew a deep breath within his helmet. "Then, if all this was created from the dust we saw, I should like to see your original world."

"You have seen it, Alva. I showed it to you, when we were sitting among the ruins. That was my people's real world. Now you see why we want to end war, everywhere."

Seafarmer turned his back on them and looked out across green land, seeing none of it. "My people learned their bitterest lesson by destroying themselves and ruining their world. As I said, we still daren't go near it—men have died after trying. Fortunately, by the time of the Final War, there was a small colony here, with the resources of the Tower and the urge to build again—or my people could never have lived."

Silence clenched itself like a fist around them. Neither of the listeners dared interrupt Seafarmer's thoughts while he stared over the hills at something they could never see.

After long minutes, Alva broke the silence.

"These people gave me a new hand," he said quietly. "I think this can be its first use."

Seafarmer turned to find Alva extending his gloved left hand to Fin-Dahma. For an instant the Ruler hesitated, then he reached with his right hand, only to pause, puzzled, seeing that a grip was impossible. In realisation he offered his other hand. Wordlessly, almost comically, muffled in pressurised clothing and transparent helmets, the young green man and the old blue man exchanged a left-handed clasp in the morning wind. Seafarmer smiled in amusement, then suddenly had to avert eyes that moistened. He looked across the plain and the hills, beyond the sea and the clouds, far out into the calling darkness, with waves of relief soothing a long dry ache within him.

*You'll learn, he thought joyfully. It's awkward, and it'll take time, but we'll do our best to show you—and I hope it doesn't take you as long as it took us . . ."*

His people had struggled from the ashes to the skies, and this was a wonderful achievement—but to Seafarmer it was even more wonderful that humanity was no longer alone on the starlit road.

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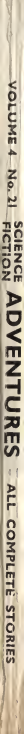
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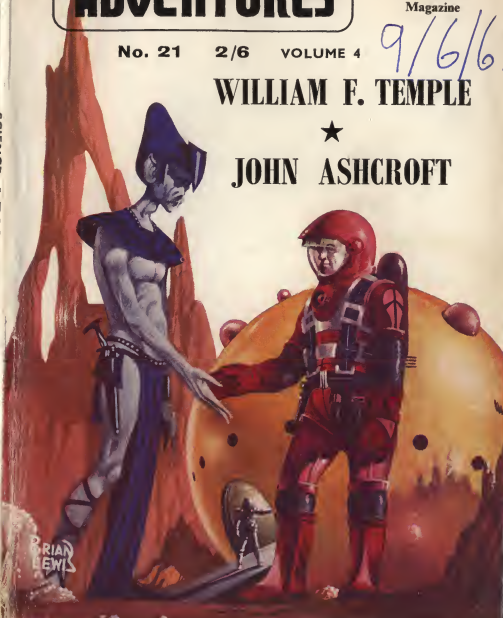
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